

MACABRE CADAVER

A Magazine of Speculative Fiction, Art and Poetry

Issue 5, December 2008

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FICTION:

Atris Ray III

David Price

Brandon Layng

Aaron J. French

Brian Lo Roc

Michelle Haworth

William Todd Rose

Bosley Gravel

ART:

Michael Stacy

POETRY:

Keaton Foster

Janie Hoffman



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A MESSAGE FROM THE PUBLISHER

Welcome to Issue 5, December 2008 of Macabre Cadaver. This is our last monthly issue. We have decided to switch to a bi-monthly publishing schedule for our online issue and we are going to begin offering printed issues of Macabre Cadaver as well on the same schedule beginning January/February 2009. You can pre-order single copies now by visiting our subscription page. The electronic issues will remain free. We would like to welcome Jeff Woodward, our new editor, aboard. Welcome to Macabre Cadaver, Jeff, and thanks for your hard work. Also, we are excited to announce that we will soon be selecting stories to be published in our first anthology by our associated imprint, Stark Raven Press.

Publisher/Executive Editor

Emmanuel Paige

Editor

Jeff Woodward

Cover Art

Michael Stacy

Macabre Cadaver Logo Font (Nosfer) by:

Eric Oehler

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FICTION

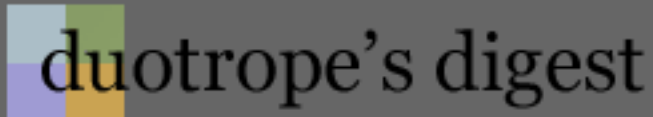
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THE PLACE SHOULD BURN

by Atris Ray III

I'M SURROUNDED BY HEATHENS. This whole bar is full of depraved, ungodly idiots. While I sip my coke, they flow around me, drunk and lustful. Of course, I'm not surprised. It's what I expected. It's what I knew. I have seen it all before.

The college girls in the booth behind me are drunk and talking about their sexual adventures over a graveyard of empty margarita glasses. Their skirts are too short, and their shirts are too tight and low cut. One of them is talking about her boyfriend's prowess in bed, and the rest are laughing like hags. They're all sluts and whores.

I just sip my coke and wait. Plenty of time left.

The bartender asks if I want anything. I ask for a little more of the mixed nuts and smile, my stomach turning in disgust. She's young and pretty. Short, but beautiful. She could easily be a sweet girl you might expect to meet at a church social. Instead, she's standing in front of me nine months pregnant with her belly button poking out over her low rise jeans. There's no wedding ring on her finger but a silver ring in each eye brow. I'm old enough to be her father, but she's far too young to be carrying a bastard child.

When she brings the nuts, I'm checking my watch. Still plenty of time left.

The couple two seats down the bar are both drunk. Possibly on drugs as well. They're talking loudly as though everyone in the bar needs to hear. Their language is a sordid mishmash of slurs, curses, and rough coughing. Every few minutes, the woman takes the cigarette out of her mouth, and they kiss lustfully like rutting animals, loud and wet. It's a disgusting display. The man's wearing a gold band, but the woman's finger is empty. Adultery is a mortal sin.

I sip more of my coke and ask for a check. Just a few more minutes now.

The place deserves to burn. All around me there are more scenes of sin. Sluts, lechers, luses, homosexuals, and wanton sinners fill every seat. I can practically taste their filth congealed in the smoky air around me. It's all I can do to avoid vomiting. All these people have fallen outside the grace of God and should be punished.

I pay the check in cash, tipping almost exactly fifteen

percent.

People remember big tippers and cheapskates. No one remembers the normal guys. If she makes it to tomorrow, the bartender won't remember me. She didn't remember me from my first visit a few weeks ago. No one does. Who would bother to remember the mousy little man with the glasses who ordered a couple cokes and minded his own business?

I smile at the bartender as she picks up the check and drain the last of my soda. I catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror beside the bar. Dressed in a gray t-shirt and black pants, I practically blend into the very shadows of this cesspool. How could they remember me? I can barely remember myself anymore.

Yes, the place deserves to burn. Fires, however, are messy things, and people can easily escape a burning bar. Arson is a matter of criminal investigation. You get intrepid C.S.I. types snooping around for microscopic pieces of evidence. As much as this place needs to be cleansed by holy fire, it's just too risky.

The device I planted under the bar is a different matter. I gently trace my finger over the steel spring, coiled like a snake above the plastic tube, and feel the faint vibration of the tiny timer. In twenty minutes, that metal snake is going to strike and pop the seal on the tube. Sarin—colorless, odorless, and deadly as sin—will spill out and evaporate into the air.

A few will start sniffing and sneezing. In another few minutes, it will be too late for the folks in the bar. Most will die painfully. Before they stop breathing, they will vomit and soil themselves like the swine they are. Those who live will suffer permanent brain damage. That's so much more effective than fire.

I can almost see the news stories in my mind. The F.B.I and Homeland Security will be down on this place like flies in dark suits and sunglasses. My head swims with visions of terrified neighbors screaming, "How could it have happened there? I've taken my kids there." It will all get worse once I pay a little visit to that Jewish community center across town. Al Qaeda will start popping onto people's lips. The whole thing will turn into a circus. My circus. God's Circus.

Meanwhile, I'll keep doing God's Holy Work. Some people have sinned beyond the lengths of forgiveness. I can't cleanse the world of them all, but I can do my part.

With a final wave to the knocked-up bartender, I make my way to the exit, doing my best to wade through the sin and debauchery without touching anyone. Opening the double doors, I welcome the cool purity of the night air with open arms and a grin.



TAR WHITE

by David Price

ON A BITTERLY COLD APRIL MORNING, a storm-battered yacht is discovered, in the area of Portland Bill, by an Isle of Wight lifeboat. A lone, and terrified young girl is found on board. Three days later, two bodies are washed up on Southampton beach. A Post Mortem reveals that the victims (a man and a woman, possibly the young girls parents) drowned. Less easy to explain is the expressions of sheer terror on their faces.

During a long journey I read about this incident in a newspaper. Then I turned the page, read about a Tory Chancellor who had been robbed at knifepoint in his own home, and forgot all about it.

I was, at that time, taking a break: my first one in quite a while. A period of illness had left me feeling weak, but I just had to get away. *Plenty of rest*, my doctor had advised, but I'd had more than enough of that.

Disembarking at the railway station, I dropped the paper into a bin. It was a cold, grey day and I just wanted to get to my hotel, settle in and relax for an hour or so. I considered taking a bus, but, as the day held a promise of sleet, I decided on a taxi. Just as well, for no sooner had I reached the guesthouse than there was a terrific hailstorm. In all honesty, there must have been better times to take a holiday.

I rang the bell, and waited only a few seconds before the owner came to the door.

"You must be Mr Sedgeley," she said.

She was about forty, and spoke with a strong Lancashire accent. Her hair was black, and clearly dyed, but she wore very little make-up. She invited me in; I paid for my room in cash, was given a key and directed to the second floor.

* * *

The whole place could generously be described as austere; the carpets a little worn, the wallpaper peeling, the toilet and washbasin stained with yellow. There was no central heating, just a small electric fire, which I plugged in. It actually made the room quite cosy. Having unpacked, I lay on the bed and closed my eyes. I'd only

meant to rest awhile, but after the long journey I soon drifted off to sleep: the warmth of the fire, no doubt, helping.

When I awoke it was just starting to get dark. At least the storm seemed to have passed. I watched the news on a portable black and white television (when I finally managed to get a picture, that is) and then left the room. I still felt as if I needed more sleep, but that was nothing new.

* * *

What a grey little town it was. I hadn't been there since I was a child, and it was a very different place; more colourful (or gaudy, depending on your point of view), and yet it still looked drab. A lot of businesses had closed down; now the shop fronts were boarded up, and covered in peeling posters for shows and gigs that had long-since been performed. It would not improve in the summer, for this was a place that had long since lost its shine; the British people's love of the cheap and cheerful seaside resort, it seemed, was at an end.

I found a quaint old teashop and called in. Ordering a pot of tea and some muffins, I sat by a window and looked out to sea. In summer it would be an alluring sight, but right now it was grey and forbidding. Maybe it had been a mistake to return, for I would undoubtedly leave with my childhood memories well and truly tainted.

* * *

Yes, the memories were happy. I could remember travelling down on a school trip during the Easter holidays. It was something we all used to look forward to. This is going back to the sixties, when I was still a child and the whole thing was an adventure.

I remember dressing up in my old Duffel coat; a black one, with rugby ball-shaped wooden toggles for buttons, which most of the boys in my class seemed to wear. Then I would pack sandwiches and soft drinks into a Duffel bag, something else that seemed like a 'must-have' accessory at the time.

Then we'd gather outside the school gates and wait for the coach to pick us up.

Yes, this old resort really had been more alive back then. Now it was quiet; no sound of children's laughter, no Punch and Judy man on the promenade, or donkey rides on the beach. These things belonged to a bygone age, when innocent pleasures were a way of life, rather than a memory.

'God, I'm 32 and thinking like an old man.'
But I still couldn't repress a pang of nostalgia.

* * *

In a moment I was distracted, for a striking looking woman had entered the room: tall, slim, a mass of auburn hair framing a pale, but attractive face. She smiled at me, briefly, and then went to the counter. It was all I could do not to stare. That hair resembled a lion's mane and hung most of the way down her back. I can't tell you how much I wanted to start up a conversation; but no, I didn't think we'd have anything in common. I finished my tea and left, wondering who she was and why she was there.

* * *

It was early 1992 when all this happened, and I have been meaning to write about it for some time. Maybe the time has come for closure, who knows? So one day this account will be read, and maybe everyone will think I'm mad; again, who knows?

Because this story really begins with a strange vision.
Illusion?

Judge for yourself.

As I have stated, the skies were grey and the sea choppy; but at length, I began to sense a change in the atmosphere.

Then, looking out to sea, I was surprised to see the water still, and sparkling; it was like staring at an oil painting of a summer's day, that's the only way I can describe it.

And then a strange, and most singular thing occurred, and it is now that you might start to question my sanity; for sailing over that calm sea was a boat, glowing and spectral; it was a pleasure boat, I could see, although none should be in service at this time of year. It glowed, as though bathed in the light of the sun; and yet the gunmetal sky admitted no light.

Then just as quickly it was gone, and the wintry sea

was as cold and forbidding as before.

I made my way back to the guesthouse, putting the image out of my mind; I'd been dwelling on the past; that was all.

* * *

As rundown as the guesthouse was, Mrs Tipton, the landlady, served up a most acceptable meal for her half dozen or so guests. Later, in the bar, I fell into conversation with a Colonel Smethwick, a permanent resident at this time of year; he had some high old tales to tell and, after a few brandies, I was happy to listen to them.

When I retired for the night I was feeling content; but nightmares can affect me at any time, and something must have triggered them on that night.

* * *

I find myself walking through a field, following a trail of effects; a toy Dalek; a bag of marbles; an action man; a model of Thunderbird 2. They belong to me and I pick them up.

But there are other objects, familiar, and yet they don't belong to me. A doll with its eyes missing; a striped teddy bear; a golliwog; a plastic Batman with a blue cape; I sling them into a Duffel bag, which seems to have unlimited space.

Then I reach the end of the trail.

The burnt-out object is there, just as it always is.

* * *

I woke up, grabbing the clock beside my bed and peering at the glowing red numbers;

04:30.

And then it all comes back to me, as though I am recalling a forgotten dream.

* * *

The Easter break, 1967, and the children are getting ready for the annual trip. But I am in bed, a bout of illness keeping me at home.

There is a knock on the door. It is Mrs Bentley, the head teacher.

"I'm sorry that Alec isn't well enough to make the trip,

Mrs Sedgeley. I just dropped by to return his fee. Hope he's better soon." Then she is gone.

I pick up my comic book; sad that I can't go, unaware how lucky I am.

No one could say, for certain, what caused the fire on board that pleasure boat; electrical failure was the most likely cause. Of the forty-two people on board, only eleven survived. I never saw my friends again.

Of course, my family had to move, and in truth I wasn't sorry to go. With all my friends gone I felt isolated (and yes, quite possibly there was a certain amount of resentment towards me, although I didn't understand this at the time).

I suppose I was always a little remote after that, unwilling to get too close to anyone. A loner.

I could block the memory out for long periods of time; but then, I could see a chiaroscuro image in the bleakest of settings, and then the long-repressed memories would drift back to the surface; unwanted, unbidden; I would not find peace for long.

* * *

I was put in touch with several councillors over the years, and they all talked about repressed guilt; but in truth, they only made things worse; whatever problems I had, there were no quick-fix solutions to them.

I lay back and thought about a field of toys. After a quarter of a century, the names and faces of my friends eluded me. Yet I was still an orphan of that tragedy.

* * *

In the morning I woke up feeling tired. It was an overcast day and that only added to my depression; what was I doing here?

I watched some news and then went for a walk, needing to clear my head. But there was no escaping the memories, even then.

In time I came to a pier (which the ill-fated boat had probably set sail from); it was in a bad state of repair, as though no one had been anywhere near it in years, and for all I knew, they hadn't.

Tar White.

The name popped into my head and the last piece of the jigsaw fell into place.

Tar White, the name of the ill-fated pleasure boat: a strange name, but one with a terrible resonance for me.

I looked away from a light on the horizon; it was nothing, I told myself; last night's hallucination was a one-off.

I turned my back on the past and made my way back to the guesthouse, thinking that childhood memories should be a lot happier than this.

* * *

Back at the guesthouse, Mrs Tipton provided a simple, but satisfying breakfast of egg and bacon on toast, followed by a pot of coffee.

I was just reading through some 'places-to-visit' leaflets when I received a most welcome interruption.

"Found anywhere interesting?"

I looked up.

"Not really," I said, as casually as I could; I could hardly believe that she was staying in the same guesthouse as I was.

"I saw you last night," I said, "In the teashop."

She smiled, and it certainly was a dazzling smile.

"Virginia Maher," she said, extending a hand.

"Alec Sedgeley,"

It was then that I noticed the scars on her wrist; burns, I could see.

She sat down.

"This place is a little grey these days," she said. "What do you do for entertainment around here?"

"There's always the pictures."

"Robin Hood? Seen it. Is that dreadful Bryan Addams record still at number one?"

"Probably." I laughed. She'd scored a point there; I couldn't stand that bloody song either.

"Really," she continued, "It wasn't always this bleak. I used to come here quite often." She reached for the coffee pot, and as she poured, I saw that the scars ran most of the way up her arm.

"So what brings you here now?" I asked, forcing myself not to stare.

"Business."

"Ah," I said nothing as she sipped the lukewarm coffee. I couldn't help wondering how much of her body was scarred.

"And there's a few ghosts; I'd like to lay them to rest before I leave."

Placing her cup to one side, she folded her arms and faced me; somewhat intently, I felt.

"You must have some good memories," she said.

"A few."

"But some *not-so-good* ones?"

I sat back, my gaze drifting to her arm. Almost self-consciously, she pulled her sleeve down.

"I didn't mean to stare," I said.

"If you must know, my left arm and shoulder were burnt. But I was one of the lucky ones. Let's take a walk, Alec; I need some fresh air."

And so we strolled along the promenade, making small talk. There was something surreal about this encounter, but I could only go with the flow.

At that time we seemed to have the entire resort to ourselves.

Tar White.

The memories were trying to resurface, and although I wanted them to, my subconscious was forcing them down.

Laying ghosts to rest?

There were certainly a few of *those* around here.

We ended up back at the pier, just about the last place I wanted to be; I tried to walk away, but she took hold of my arm.

"I really don't want to be *here*," I said.

"It's more painful for me, Alec; this is where I had my accident."

"Virginia ..."

"Back in 1967; on a school trip; I was the only child to survive. Does the name *Tar White* mean anything to you?"

I didn't need to answer; maybe the look in my eyes said it all.

"Yes: you remember now; I can see that. But you're luckier than I am; you can repress the memories. Well I can't; and unlike you, I can *still* see their faces. And before you ask, it was *you* who told me this; I'm just another memory that you repressed."

I looked out to sea, and would have sworn that I could hear the screams of the dying. It was a distant call of seagulls, of course, but the sound was still unsettling.

"Some say that *Tar White* still sails over that stretch of water," she said. "Some even claim to have seen children waving from the upper decks."

Her words were chilling, and at any other time I would have laughed off such a bizarre story.

But hadn't I seen the ghost of *Tar White*?

"Maybe the children are still out there; enjoying the

day-trip. My sister died in that fire. I can still see her face, even after all this time."

I placed a hand on her shoulder, but I was unable to find the right words. I wasn't even sure what she wanted.

"You still don't remember me, do you, Alec? I was born in a house just across the road from you. My sister was called Esther, and the three of us used to walk to school in the mornings. We were at your birthday party a few weeks before the accident. But you've blanked out your entire past, haven't you? Including me. I came to see you once before, and I really needed a friend; but you turned me away; just like everyone else."

Her words cut deep. All I'd ever thought about was the effect that the tragedy had had on *me*.

But other people suffered too, even more than I had.

"I'm sorry," I said, "But it's been twenty-five years ..."

"Twenty-five years to the day, Alec. It's no coincidence that we are both here now. We need closure, and so do they."

"They?"

"The children. We have to let them know that the day-trip is over."

From the corner of my eye, I could see a light on the horizon; but I ignored it. I could accept what she was saying, now, although it would have been a different story a few days ago.

"*Can* we help them?" I asked.

"Yes; if you're ready to face the past."

I looked out to sea, but there was nothing there.

Is this what I'd been running away from all this time? The ghosts?

Or was it the guilt?

I'd never moved on: not mentally, anyway. So I'd run, and I'd kept on running; but I'd never been able to hide.

"I'm ready," I said, and that was all she wanted to hear.

* * *

At two o'clock we returned to the pier. The sky was a familiar shade of gunmetal grey, the promenade deserted; apart from the odd van, I might have sworn we were in the middle of a ghost town.

Virginia linked her arm through mine and we started walking along the pier. It had not been used in years: I could only hope that the creaking timbers would take our weight.

"Does *this* bring back memories?" she asked.

"Some."

I could remember the taste of candyfloss and toffee apples. Maybe the smell of the sea had evoked these memories, for it was all coming back to me now: little recollections that had been buried for years. There was a distant call of seagulls, and just for a moment, I could have sworn I'd heard the sound of children's voices.

I'd played on this pier in happier times; running, climbing on the benches and looking out to sea: charging around the pillars and pavilions in an endless game of hide and seek. These were the childhood memories I had lost.

Virginia let go of my hand and walked ahead of me. After a few paces she stopped, shading her eyes with a hand and staring at the horizon.

"We all need closure," she said. "I'm a spiritualist, Alec, and a very powerful one. I've helped lost souls in the past."

She turned to look at me.

"I discovered this empathy with The Spirit World a few years after the fire. Maybe it came about because of it, who knows? It didn't start until after I'd recovered from the accident."

Unconsciously, she was rubbing her arm.

"I was like a lost child, and they came to me to me. As I grew older, and I became more capable of understanding, I found that I was able to help them. You see, Alec, young people who come to a sudden or violent end go through a period of denial. So I talk to them. They have to be made to understand; can you see that?"

She looked at me a moment, then nodded; I did understand, and she could see that; now *I* was ready for closure.

The temperature dropped. I glanced at my watch. It was almost at the time of the fire.

And then the strangest thing; I suddenly remembered how Virginia had looked as a child; a pretty girl, no wonder she had grown into such a striking woman.

She was born in 1960, I remembered, a few months before me. Her sister had been born in 1959. Yes, I remembered them: so much alike, and so close.

I saw something out of the corner of my eye, a small child, I thought; but there was no one else there.

Memories?

Yes: just memories, I told myself.

But no, there *was* a presence here; and out on the

horizon, I could see the ghostly form of *Tar White* gliding over the waves; an eerie, yet majestic sight.

"Open your mind, Alec; believe."

We were suddenly surrounded by the ghost's of a dozen children.

Now I could see their faces and remember their names; could almost reach out and touch them.

Virginia started walking towards the end of the pier, although I could no longer *see* that far; up ahead was a bright golden light.

Could this be a doorway between 'The Worlds'?

The children began to follow her, an orderly procession, as though she were the teacher in charge.

The sound of music drifted out of long-abandoned arcades, the smell of hotdogs hung in the air; I could even hear the cry of vendors selling their wares, the laughter of children enjoying the donkey rides.

Virginia stopped at the end of the pier, and then turned to face the children.

"It's time to go now," she said. "Just walk towards the light, hurry now."

And without question they filed past her, almost as if they were heading for a waiting coach.

I saw them walk into the light, heading for the place we all must go; and I felt terribly sad, as if I was finally saying goodbye to them.

Then the last child hesitated before the light.

She turned, smiled.

Esther.

She waved goodbye, turned into the light, and then joined her friends on the other side.

And then there was nothing; the light, the children, *Tar White*; all gone.

I took Virginia in my arms and held her: for she was now crying, uncontrollably, as though finally overwhelmed by grief.

"They're home now," I told her, "The day-trip is over."

But all she could do was cry, and let go of the past.

It was all *anyone* could do.



The Hitchhiker

An Urban Legend Retold

by Brandon Layng

THEY'D HAD A FEW DRINKS, not too many, enough to have fun.

The dancing was wild and hot, the boys pressing their sweaty bodies against the girls and smoke hung in the air. She was happy that her friends had invited her out to the dance, which she was pessimistic about when they first mentioned it and she was having such a good time that when it was time to go because one of her friends had to make her eleven o'clock curfew, she was reluctant to leave.

It was the last dance of the summer.

She buckled her safety belt when they pulled out of the parking lot and started down the highway. The air started to chill as it pushed through the opened passenger window. Her friends were laughing, making lewd comments about how certain boys looked in their jeans and how they would look out of them. She blushed a little at their comments even though they were behaving as most girls do when they've had a good time. They seemed a mirthful haze, to Susan, from her vantage point in the backseat. She wanted to join in on their fun except every time she opened her mouth to speak the wind snatched away her breath, forcing her to turn her head and breath through her nose.

She decided to gaze out the window, watching the trees go by, her mind drifting with her own intoxication, and thinking that they were going a little fast for the gravel roads. Then her friends were screaming with wild laughter as they turned onto the causeway leading across the lake to the cottages where their families stayed for the summer.

Crazy with the heat, fortified with alcohol, and consumed with the wantonness of a good time they raced down the road. Susan watched the water from the backseat, it seemed to stand still as they rushed passed it, giving no indication of their speed to her, and perhaps she would have panicked a little to know that the car was speeding along at a good twenty miles an hour faster than the recommended limit on the two lane roadway. The causeway was bordered by thin sheet metal guardrails supported by thick wooden posts that were only as

high as the car windows. Their presence virtually eliminated any shoulder for cars to pull off onto. And had she known the speed it would not have been so difficult for her to imagine the little car careening on slick patch of road before smashing like a rock through a window to come shattering through the still surface of the lake. It would not have been difficult at all.

Still watching the lake, she smiled at the ribbing the driver was taking for disappearing with one of the townies during the dance and she thought of the boy she had met, the one with the lettered jacket who played Quarter Back for his high school football team in a town not far from her own home. He was big and sweet, with broad shoulders, a strong chin and a smile that grew from his lips to his blue eyes. Susan was practically swooning in the backseat when her friends good-natured banter turned to arguing.

She turned back to the front seat, instantly smacked in the face from the air, hearing the two girls calling each other names, the good buzz worn off and then seeing the car was half in the second lane, a transport truck coming fast. In the instant she saw the truck she screamed—only to be drowned out by the bullhorn from the eighteen-wheeler. The other two girls echoed her cry before the driver swerved into her own lane, the transport's air brakes were a banshee against the night air, the sound seeming to crack the windshield of the car.

Susan soon realized that it was a piece of the guardrail hitting the window that broke the glass. Her friend, panicking in an attempt to avoid the collision had turned the wheel too much slamming the car into the barricade. The momentum pushed them through and into the water.

On the causeway the transport was not fairing much better. With the wheels locked up the trailer quickly jackknifed and with a screeching of metal pushed past their stress points, fell into the opening made by the car. The truck's driver dove out of the door as the backend started to slide down the embankment, leaving rubber on the road and ruts in the embankment.

In the front seat of the car Susan's friends were tossed around like helium balloons. The car sat level on the water

and as the car started to sink, water rushed in, welling up in the backseat. The two girls rolled down their windows, not really thinking as they did it, that Susan, sitting in the back of the two-door sports car, was denied the luxury of such an easy escape hatch. They were panicking. Susan fumbled with her seat belt, which sometimes stuck on even the best of occasions, while she watched them scramble out the openings into the rising water. From the little triangle windows to either side of her she saw them swim past towards the causeway.

A moment later she was in shadows. The light of the full moon blotted out by the trailer looming over the car and a great groaning made the hairs on her arms stand on end as the hitch snapped and the metal—with all of its cargo—slammed into the back of the car.

Cold water rushed in through the windows.

* * *

When she had crawled up the embankment she could see her friends weeping while the driver ran back to his rig, which had survived (minus the trailer that was almost completely submerged.) Susan tried calling out to girls, who huddled together to keep warm but they wouldn't lift their heads. Indeed they showed no signs of hearing her.

She was tired and a little sore at them for nearly getting her killed. After a few minutes of standing dripping wet and completely ignored she decided to go home to the cottage she stayed in with her mother. It was only half a mile away and walking would warm her, she reasoned with herself. When she got back she would change into some dry clothes before phoning her friends to find out if they were fine. The most important thing was for her to get home. Her mother would be worried about her.

After a little bit of time passed, the road in front her was illuminated by a pair of headlights, a car pulling up behind her, and the light threw out a long shadow from a road marker, which stretched out beneath her feet. The car stopped, she heard the driver's side door open and someone running towards her. She heard her name called. Turning around Susan saw the boy from the dance, headlights making his shadow look massive as it stretched out over the road's shoulder and into the woods. She smiled, the night's events had made her feel insubstantial and the attempt was weak. He stepped towards her, his own elation at seeing her, enough to compensate for her lukewarm reception.

"Oh my God." He said as he stood in front of her before grabbing her by the shoulders and pulling her to him. "I saw what happened back on the causeway, your friends are freaking out. They thought you'd drowned."

Her only response was a shiver.

"You must be freezing. Come on I'll give you a ride back to your cottage," he suggested directing her over to the car.

She was sitting on the passenger seat, her clothes soaking the fabric with chilly water when he opened the door and sat back behind the wheel. He was a sweet boy and she liked him very much. He started the engine and when the heat poured out of the vents it only made her feel more tired and cold, her eyes heavy-lidded as her body trembled. She hugged herself to kept warm, tried to huddle herself against her knees and then there was a weight on her back. He had draped his lettered jacket over her shoulders.

On the way back to her cottage, where she knew her mother would be waiting in the window, he attempted to make small talk. Too upset to make much conversation, she could only think of her nice warm bed. She nodded in response and pointed to where he should turn. It was all she could manage.

And when they finally pulled into the driveway, there was her mother waiting for her in the window and a moment later her mother's face was gone from the window. She turned to the boy, offering him a smile and he leaned forward to give her a kiss. It was soft and warm against her cold lips. She felt a sense of belonging in his lips and when they separated and he turned to look at the open doorway where her mother stood, he smiled and said, "you better get inside, your mother seems worried about you." She had left the car, leaving the jacket on the seat.

She waved to her mother, who waved back to her before fading away in the light of the doorway.

* * *

A few years later on the anniversary of the accident Susan was walking down the causeway in the pouring rain. Taking the annual walk home had become a way of life for her.

The gravel on the shoulder of the road was silent beneath her feet. Her sodden mass of hair hung in her face and she wore the same clothes as the night of the accident. She never had the chance to make the phone call to her friends to find out if they had made out all right,

in fact she hadn't even spoken to them since. She guessed they had gone for the summer and never come back.

As if on cue a car pulled up behind her and the driver called out to ask if she wanted a ride. Every year the same thing happened, one of the summer people or a person passing through would stop and offer her a lift home and in the tradition of that night she always accepted. Sometimes they would offer her a sweater or coat to keep her warm on the drive, never a letter jacket, but always something. They attempted small talk and she gave them hand gestures to indicate the direction to her cottage where her mother would be waiting in the window. After a couple of years her mother had given up coming to the door to wait, perhaps too tired in her growing age for her part in the tradition. Each anniversary she appeared older than the last, which saddened Susan to a great extent – she never meant for her mother to suffer because of her own needs.

On this particular night, Susan was picked up by a traveling salesman who draped a wool sweater over her shoulder and when it was time for her to leave at the end of the driveway she had forgotten to leave it behind on the seat. After a certain feeling of distress she resolved to put it somewhere she was sure the salesman would find it in the morning.

The locals never picked her up. They drove on by her occasionally as they applied more pressure to the accelerator. Only the out-of-towners stopped, the people who couldn't have known her. Had no way of knowing about her curious tradition.

The year always seemed to be gone with the snap of fingers and then she was back on the causeway trying to get home. Each anniversary passing and her mother getting older like time-lapse photography in the window. Then had come the year the routine changed a little. The year the driver had pulled onto the shoulder behind her and called her name. She couldn't see the man in the rounded car that gleamed in the moonlight. She stepped into the passenger seat without a sound, simply leaned forward, huddling against the chill of her water soaked clothes. That was a part of the tradition as well, the water drenched clothing even on dry nights without a cloud in the sky. The driver hadn't offered her a sweater or coat, only flicked a switch on the dash which instantly signaled her seat to warm up.

When she glanced over at him she saw he was broad shouldered with a face that ended in a strong chin. A

Marc Anthony face to her Cleopatra. He was smiling and it was the most contradictory smile she had ever seen, simultaneously joyful and sorrowed.

"I can't believe it's you," he said. "You haven't aged a day."

Her own look was weak with only a fraction of joy in it. With her second glance she saw his ring finger, the faded white line of skin, as he buckled his belt again. He saw her looking and gave a half-hearted chuckle, more to himself than for her benefit.

"I'm divorced," he said. She could see he wanted to say more about it. Instead he changed the subject. "I'm just up here at the old cottage, my father passed away a few years back and I decided to try to fix it up. Who knows maybe I'll sell it if the price is right."

She made no reply, only watched her feet. He pressed his lips between his teeth while raising his eyebrows, she guessed he had decided the time had come to get moving. He pressed a series of commands into a monitor on the dash and the car drove down the road without need for her gestured directions. His hands were clearly only on the wheel for aesthetic reasons, she could see there was no force behind his movements more like a drifting boat going where the current takes it.

"It's funny. I was coming back from town with a few supplies and I was thinking of stopping in at your cottage to see your mom." He was casting looks in her direction to see how much of what he was saying she was actually listening to. "Your mother saw you in the car when that salesman dropped you off."

She felt a fluttering of hope at this. He must have seen something show in her face because he continued on, turning himself in the seat so he could look at her better while he talked. The car made the turn down the road to her cottage by itself.

"The salesman was happy that you left the sweater on the marker, his own mother had knitted it for him before she passed away." Her eyes flicked up to him for only a moment. She was happy to hear she had been able to repay some of the kindness the salesman had shown her. "I've come up here many times to find you, going the way we had gone the that night of the accident. Each time I found out I had just missed you. Your mother told me that I had come only seconds after you were dropped off."

They car was only a hundred feet from the driveway by this time and he had to turn off the auto-navigation de-

vice so he could guide the car onto the cracked pavement leading to the cottage. They had come to a soft stop when he turned to her again, before she made to leave. "Your mother loves you very much and she misses you."

After a second, he said, "we love you. Please come home Susan?"

She raised her head to look at him and then she was outside of the car. The sight of his lettered jacket in the backseat brought a tearful smile to her face, which was not nearly as sad as when she saw her mother standing in the light of the doorway. The woman who was always so youthful in appearance was bent with age and sorrow. She waved to her and her mother waved slowly back.

* * *

More anniversaries passed and she was given more rides by out-of-towners in stranger and stranger vehicles – vehicles is the proper term since few of them resembled cars by the last couple of years – including one that according to the driver, who boasted with pride, ran on air, your common available to everyone, air. The following year she was picked up by another air-fueled vehicle, which had grown quite popular she had found out in this particular man's attempts at banter.

The year after she had seen her mother in the doorway was the last year the woman was there to watch her being dropped off. The lights were on in the house but no one sat at the window and she soon despaired that she would ever come home without her mother's vigilance to guide her.

The next time she saw the boy with the lettered jacket was the year the second air-fueled vehicle dropped her off. She was outside the thing, which hovered a foot from the driveway, leaving her usual wet mark on the seat from her soaking clothes and there at the porch steps was the boy. He looked the way he did at the dance; young, handsome and as sweet as ever. He had come off the steps towards her with his hand extended and She had taken it in her own, relishing the feel of it, it being so long since she had held a hand. He took his jacket off and placed it on her shoulders before guiding her towards the steps.

"I've been waiting for you Susan."

She smiled a genuine smile and with tears dripping from her eyes instead of lake water, she said, "I've been waiting for you too."

They walked up the steps and across the porch to the

front door of the cottage. She suddenly felt she had to ask. "Where's my mother gone?"

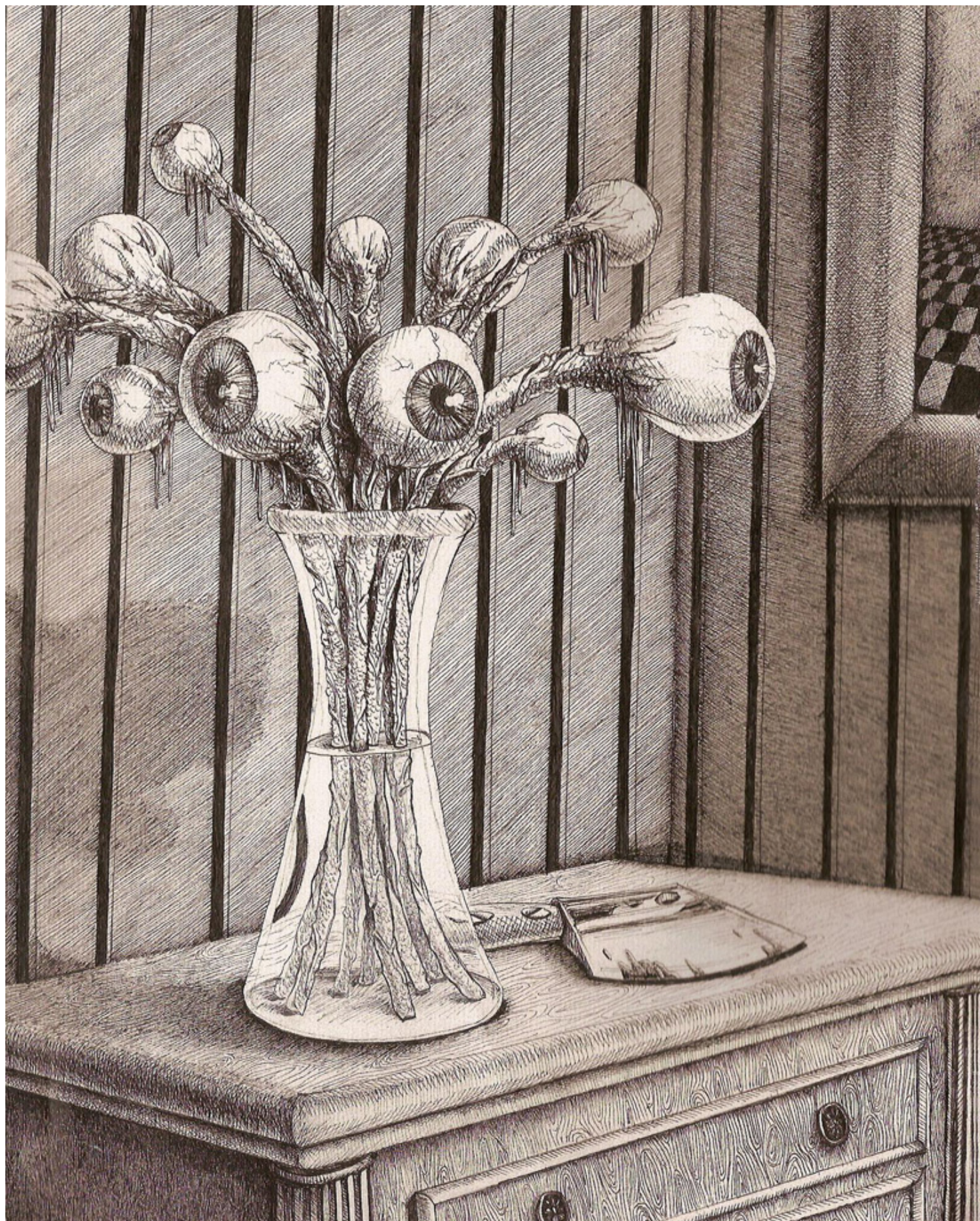
He stopped with his hand on the doorknob. "She passed away the year I picked you up last and I purchased the cottage to always make sure you had a place to come." He turned the knob and pushed the door open. "And now I've passed so I could bring you home."



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Michael Stacy

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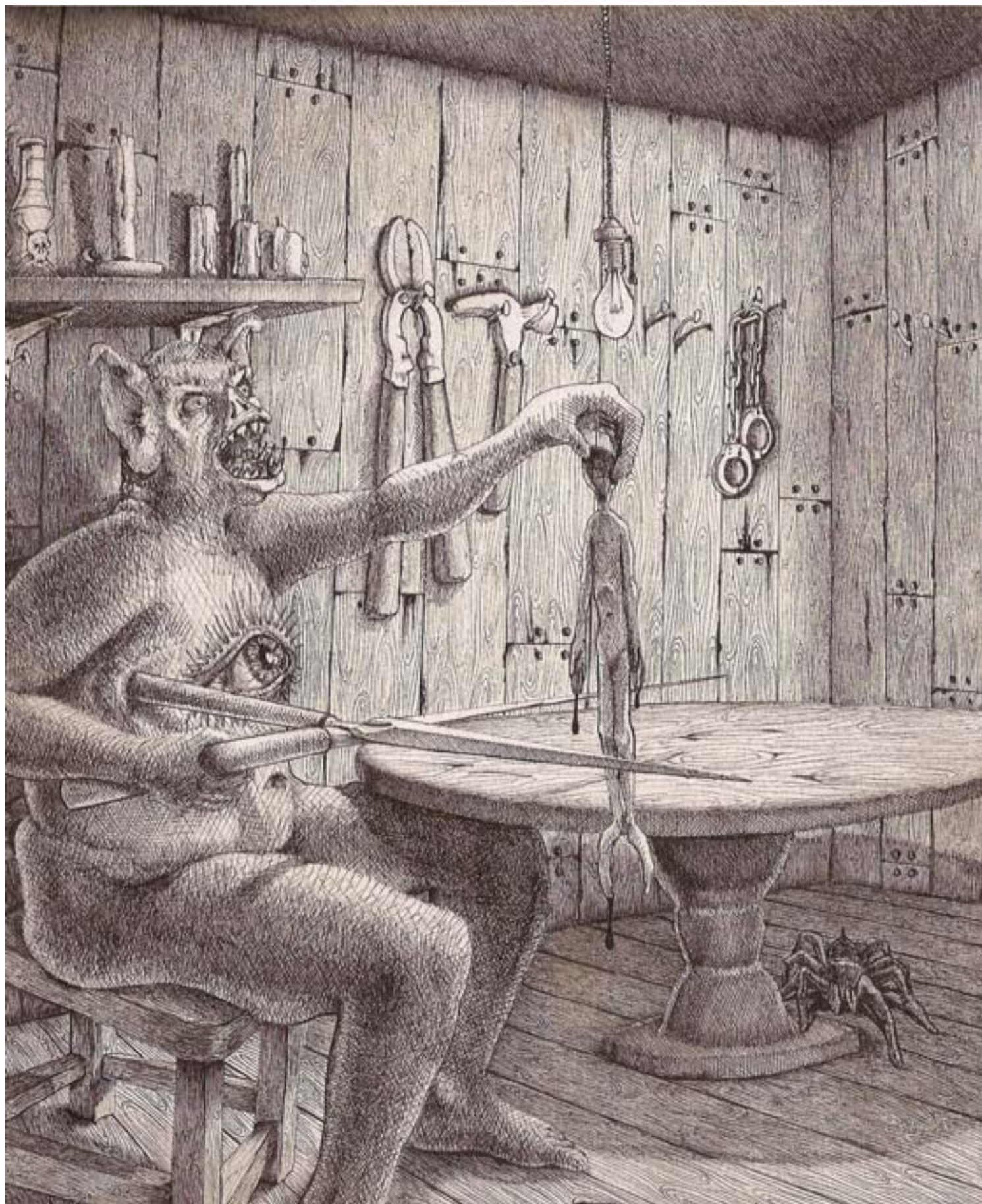
Michael Stacy is a graduate from the SVA (School of Visual Arts), in Manhattan with a Illustration BFA.

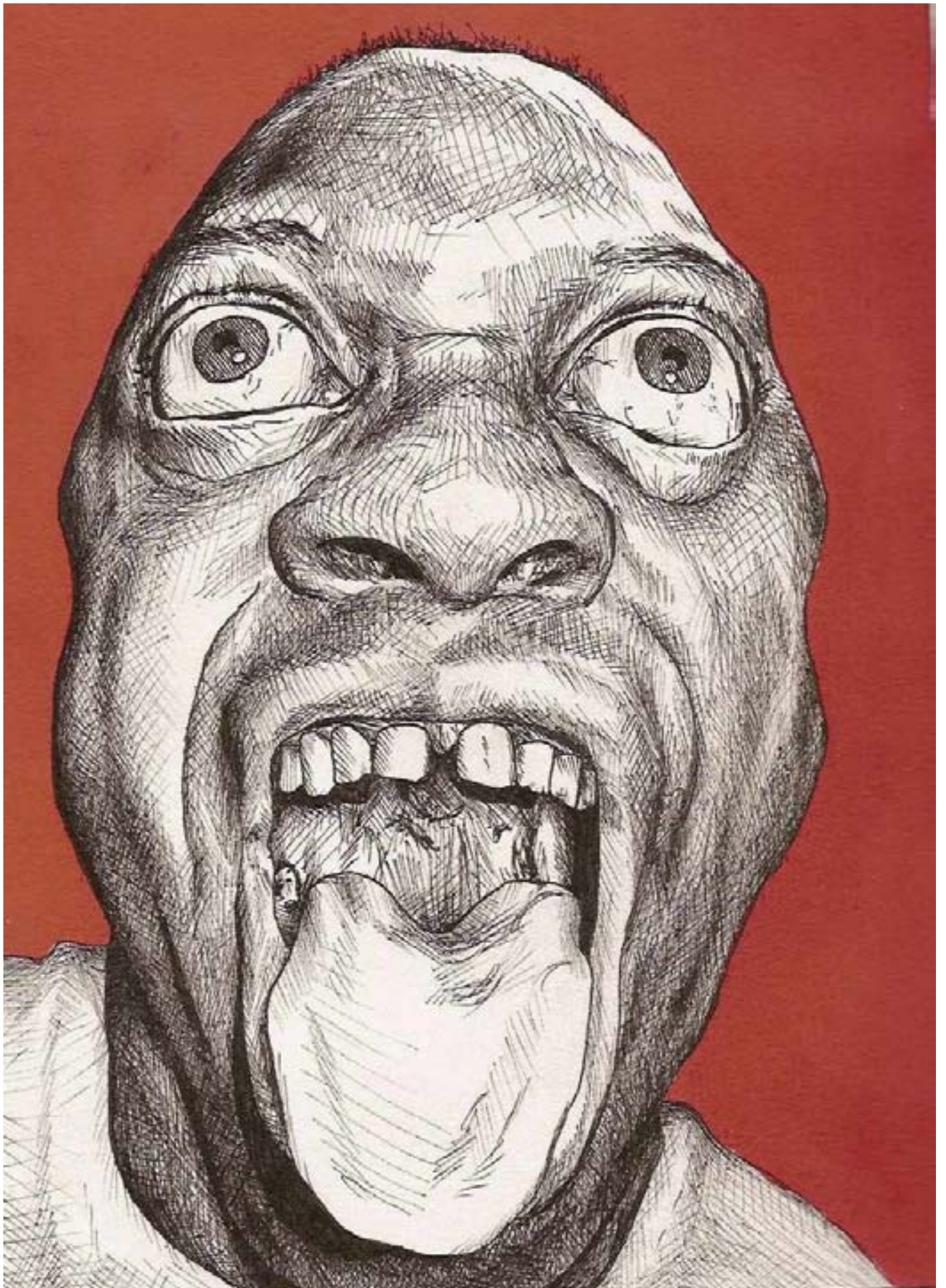
Bio: "I've been intrigued by art from the first time I was introduced to a Norman Rockwell book around the age of 4. I decided to pick up a pencil and pad and still am unable to put them away. I preferably enjoy doing a lot of portrait work. I feel I have a strong ability to catch a certain likeness of characters, and create a palette with an abundance of color. I also have been doing a lot of ink work using felt tip pen and indian ink. This began as just being therapeutic and evolved into something that had a quality of professionalism. I play around with a lot of different pen technics and relish being able to start with a little line and build it up into something with much detail."

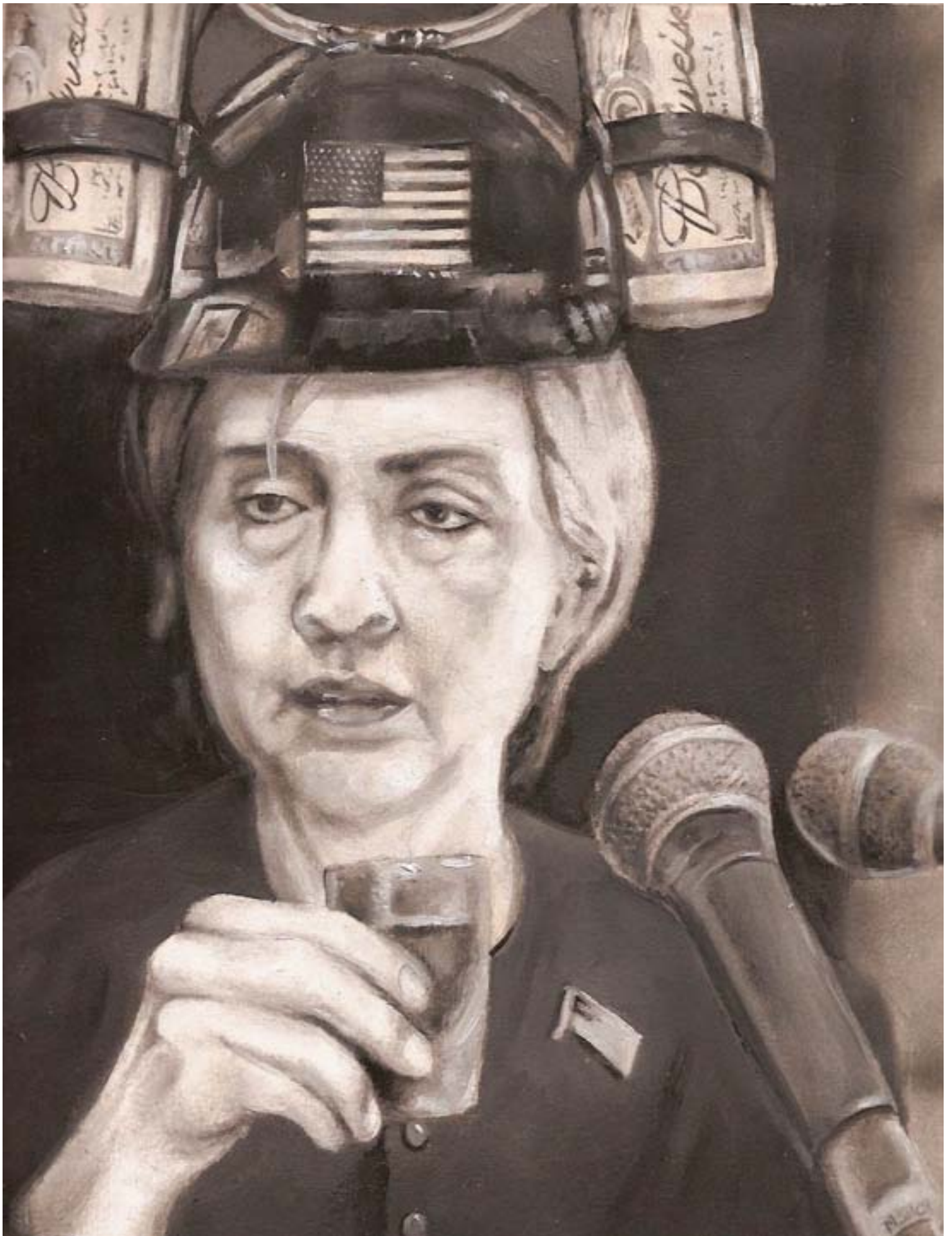
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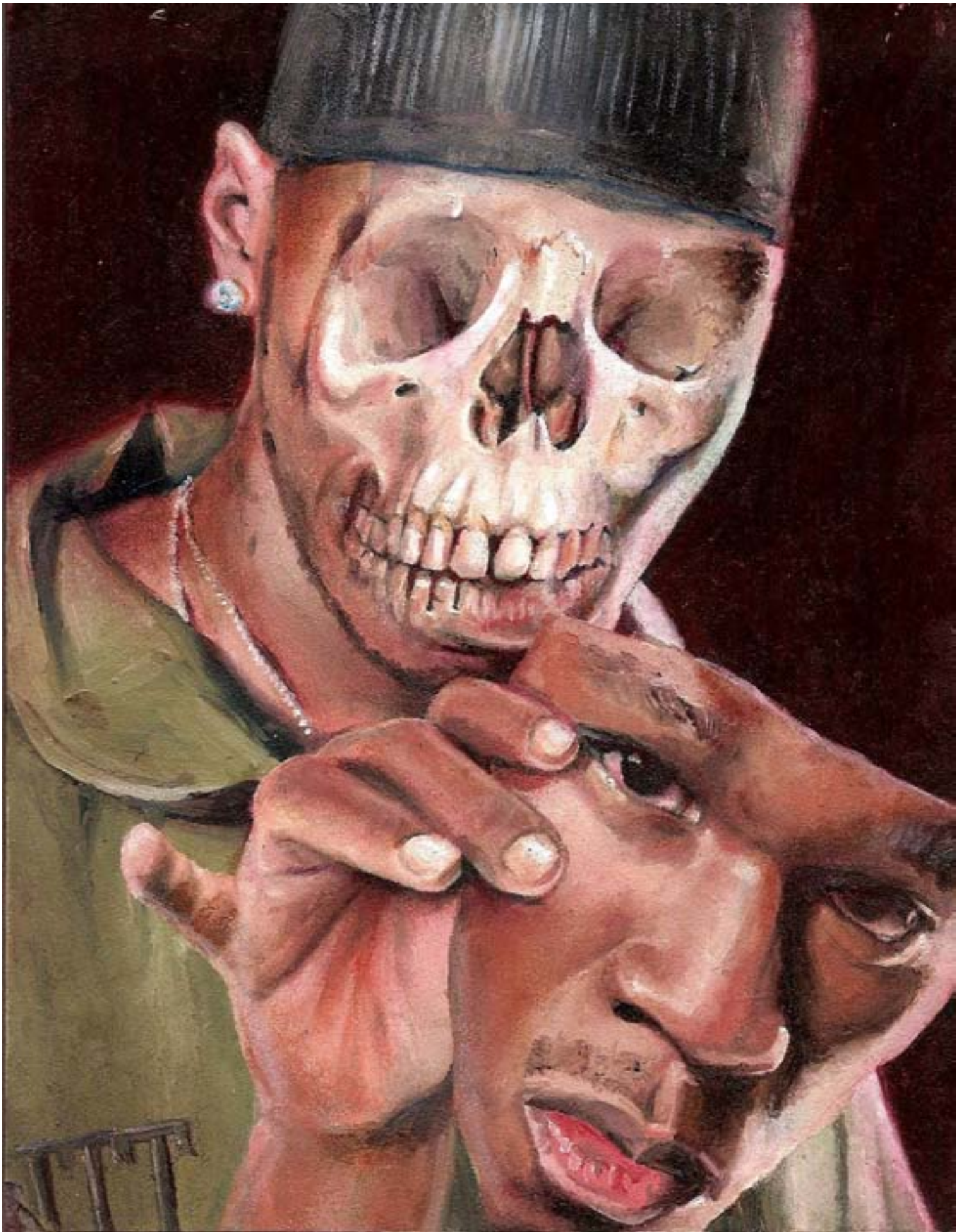












MOTHER

by Aaron J. French

ANDY VISITED HIS MOTHER'S GRAVE EVERY YEAR on the anniversary of her death. She'd died from throat cancer on October eleventh, one month after the World Trade Towers had fallen; while the rest of the country mourned, Andy was burying her in Serene Groves Cemetery. Way in back, far from ostentatious mausoleums and headstones. She'd lived a poor life, had died poor, had raised one poor son. So she rested in what Andy called the ghetto of the graveyard: a dirt plot in the back where weeds grew, where a wash abutted the cemetery. No grass, just decaying flowers and dead leaves.

He stood looking at her name carved in cold granite. He was ashamed he'd not been able to afford a marble headstone. His father had run off by the time he was nine, and she'd never remarried. She was alone, would be until Andy himself died. Then he'd be lowered into the ground beside her. Then Marsha and Andy Hancock would be together, just the two of them. The way it'd always been.

The sky was gray and the trees had shaken clean their branches. Leaves covered the ground, turning brittle, yellowing, dying. Sharp winds cut the air. Streets and buildings beyond the cemetery appeared bloodless. Dead-looking cars passed by. A hollow chill hugged the Earth.

Winter had been her favorite season.

It still was.

He pulled his coat tighter and reached for the spade leaning against her headstone. He scanned the surrounding area, made sure no one was watching. In the west, the last sunlight sank toward oblivion.

He started digging.

The blade screeched as it chopped through the ground. The upper crust was hard, but underneath the soil was soft. He dumped each shovelful to the side until a brownish mound had formed. The sound of his labor echoed through the cemetery. Frequently, he glanced over his shoulder to make sure no one was watching. But no one was. After all, this was the ghetto of the graveyard. Hardly anyone came here.

Thirty minutes later it was night. He'd wanted to bring a lantern for this, but knew it would only attract attention. So he continued his work in darkness. He did,

however, remove his coat and T-shirt. And though it was cold, and getting colder, he began to sweat.

He checked his wristwatch and saw that an hour had passed. He decided to take a break. Through the screen of trees, car headlights flashed, and he heard a rustling in the nearby washbed. Probably just a feral cat, he thought, as he reached into his pants pocket for the joint he'd rolled before leaving the house.

He stood with his hands resting on the spade handle, and his chin resting on his hands. Smoke filled his lungs. He wondered if he would be caught. He didn't think so. Serene Groves did have a security guard, but he probably stuck to the main part of the cemetery. That's where the graves were most expensive. That's where someone would go if they wanted to do some robbing. No one ever came to the ghetto of the graveyard. Not unless they had family there.

When the world began to shine, he realized he had smoked enough marijuana. He put out the joint, flicked it into the pitch-black washbed, wiped his brow, and went back to digging.

Sirens rang out all over town. Car engines roared like ravenous beasts. A city bus squealed to a halt by the curb. A homeless man shouted as he crossed the street.

In the cemetery it was silent save for Andy's shoveling. Not even insects stirred. There was only the cold, empty wind.

After another hour, his blade struck a hard surface. He sighed in relief. He didn't think he could go on much longer. His back hurt and blisters had erupted on his fingers. He stooped and brushed dirt from the coffin lid. Flecks of gold glinted in the paint. She was in there, dead, waiting.

He chucked the spade out of the hole and stood up, his feet planted on either side of the coffin. He put his hands on his hips.

"All right, Ma," he said. "You can come out."

Nothing. A car horn beeped in the distance. Leaves twitched.

He sighed. She always did this. He couldn't understand why. She only had one night a year to be alive; there was

no sense in procrastinating.

He bent, knocked thrice on the lid, then erected. “Dija hear me, Ma? I said you can come out now. Or don’t you remember what night it is? Please, I don’t believe that for a second. I know you’ve been waiting all year for this.”

The coffin shook slightly. Ah, Andy thought, here she comes. It shook harder, buffeting the sides of the hole, knocking loose dirt into the grave.

Andy put his arms to either side, lifted his knees, and hopped out. He watched as the lid swelled, protested, then popped open. Watched as the dissected corpse—nothing but a pile of bones, really—re-congealed with flesh. Watched her hair grow back. Watched the white dress stitch itself back together. Watched her eyelids flutter.

Watched her sit up.

“Hey, you,” he said, kneeling, extending his hand. She seemed disoriented at first, but little by little she gathered her wits and let him hoist her out.

She tried standing, fell. He helped her to her feet. She leaned against the headstone and looked around. She was just as he remembered her. Wearing the same pretty dress, her hair long and gray, her wrinkled skin glowing. It was like he’d buried her that morning.

Finally she took a deep breath, “Ahh,” and glanced at him. “Hi, Andy.”

“Hi, Ma.”

“That time already?”

He scoffed. “Don’t act like you didn’t know. I mean, what else do you have to think about three hundred and sixty-four days a year?”

She shrugged. “You’d be surprised. I think about a lot of things, actually. My life, your life. Your father.”

“Don’t give me that.”

She suddenly broke into a hellishly wild laugh. “All right I admit it! I’ve thought of nothing but this day! And now here I am. And I can’t wait to get my hands on those pudgy little children. Oh, I’m so hungry! I’m gonna peel the flesh from their bones with my teeth, then drink their blood and swallow their hearts!”

Andy put a hand to his stomach, put the other one up in the air. “Please, Ma, spare me the details, all right? It’s hard enough coming here each year, digging you up, then re-burying you. The less I know, the better.”

She nodded, but clearly she couldn’t contain herself. Her whole body shook with excitement, and a line a

drool formed on her chin.

“So are you done with me?” Andy said. “May I go now?”

“Yes, you may. But don’t act like I don’t appreciate it, Andy. I’m very thankful for what you do every year. It shows how much you care about me.”

He blushed in the darkness. He didn’t really go for sentimental stuff, but it was nice to hear her say it.

She began walking away, then seemed to hesitate. She turned partly and said, “You will come back and bury me before dawn, won’t you?”

“Of course I will. Just make sure you’re here on time. I don’t want a repeat of last year. I almost got arrested, you know.”

She frowned. “No, I didn’t know that. I’m sorry. I promise to be back sooner this time.”

He nodded, pretended to understand, watching as she vanished into the darkness.

He started for the car, thinking he might stop and get a drink on the way home. It would probably help him sleep. And that was a good thing. After all, he had to come back in less than five hours.



Oblivion

by Keaton Foster

Into the abyss of memories I wish to fall.
Deep down to the darkest of place where I shall remain forgotten
By all who have ever been touched by my ways.

Deafening rage creeps from my soul in waves of pain.
I wish to silence all that I have become in this place.
Never again shall I come forward into the light.
Oblivion shall be my new destination.
I shall embrace all that is represents.

I have nothing in this realm I aimlessly walk around in.
I am in a constant state of daze as the true weight of my past
Sickens me beyond all hope, beyond all life known to me.
I wish to be dead but I am afraid that is a fate for me
That will be held at bay, for my time has not yet expired.
Pain is not done with me, it revels in the sickness It represents.

I will find no rest for my weary head.
I will not receive any mercy for I have never shown any.
Sympathy is for the devil, I make him look as if he is a saint.
God has no pride in me, for I am not his creation.
I am of my own design.

Oblivion is my only escape, It has to be there.
The nothingness it represents shall set my victims free
Of the memories of me and all that I am.
I wish to set them free, for even I have come too far
In the ways of the wicked.

I have regret, I have pain for all that I have done.
I have remorse, so I shall take the first step towards oblivion.
I will leap into the chasm of blackness I represent.
The sanity of me will be set aside,
So that the insanity I breed can be my demise.

How does one cease to exist in ways that
Erase all memory of those affected so deeply, so completely.
How do I stop all that I have done in my life from
Continuing long after I have gone.
There is no way to erase their pain as surely as
There has been no way to erase my own.

There is only one choice, I fear its end result.
I must decide to accept its fate for it is all that
Will set them free from the monstrosity of me.
I must cease to exist in any way, I must die
In the absoluteness oblivion represents.

I must leave this place, so that in time I am
Forgotten to all that I have touched in sick ways.
I must die so that they can truly live beyond the memory of me.
Oblivion is the place I must seek in the realm that unfolds before me.

I have made my choice, I will now succeed.
Failing is not an option for too many depend on my death.
They need me to cease to exist so that they can finally
Put the memories I represent away forever.
They need me to be a small speck of sand
In the hourglass of their lives.

As I stand here looking down into the deepest, darkest place I know.
I leave a note laying nearby so that all will know I have gone.
I am sorry for all I have done and all I have become.
I know no other way to make amends except to leap to my death.

I am sorry for all of you I have hurt, for you pain has returned to me in waves.
I have left this world behind, into the deepest, darkest pit I have leaped.
Oblivion awaits me in my final resting place.
May my death lead the way to your life.

I hope you forget me, far beyond all that you know.
I hope I am all but a passing note in the pages of your life.
I wish not to have ever been born, but I am afraid that was not the case.
I did not choose to live, but I choose to die so that you may.

Oblivion awaits.....

BIO: For Keaton Foster writing is not only a hobby or something he does in hopes of fame or fortune. Writing is and will always be a way of life, something he must do. He lives to create writings that go beyond conventionality, far beyond the normal whatever that is. Piercing deep into the heart of what it means to be alive, to be human. "We owe it to ourselves to question all that climbs to the sky and falls at our feet" (Keaton Foster, 2008). Enjoy your trip through the world that will be painted, the questions that will be raised, and the emotions that will be conveyed within my words. Visit Keaton Foster's Websites: <http://www.beyondthedarknesscreativewritings.net> and <http://keatonfoster.Writing.Com>

IN THE SHADOWS OF GALL

by Janie Hoffmann

When I offer my salt, wine and polished flint
to a wooden cross bleeding ochre, I take care

of my tremble less the gnarled wood guess my ruse.
In the South, Cathars are burning, sacred oaks

are peppered with straw dolls strung by the neck,
innocent myraids spat upon and early crops burned

for cleansing. And I can only shiver, hide
in my own cloak until the sun drops from the smoky

horizon and I light a final candle. I say farewell
forever to my bag of little dolls, dried herbs

and the piece of gold given to my mother by a Byzantine
on the day of my birth. Aradia looks upon me in pity

as I bury my bag under the hysop then join the village
for the raising of a cross atop the temple of Sequana.

I fear the Spring will yield no buds in return for my quiet
crime and hide all new life from me under a wrenching

chill cast by the interlocking shadow of cross and sword.
And how to endure without the green of Summer?

The licorice mint, thyme and tormentil once so soft
under my feet, hiding my footsteps one leaf at a time.

JEWELS

by Brian Lo Roc

WHAT DEFINES THE SECONDS BEFORE an encounter? Can the subconscious follow it the way a wolf might follow the scent of blood? Are the cues ever given to us? I wondered this for a long time.

Usually my wife had this thing about stopping every half hour to pee. On long trips—this particular one seven hours—I learned rest, as in rest stop, should be called inconvenience. Of course Valerie would tell me I was thinking from a man's perspective—and maybe I was—but if you asked me, I'd tell you to write the number two and circle it; add this to pee standing up: a man's ability to maintain consistency.

When the urge struck me, we were in Connecticut en route to New Jersey, the New Hampshire countryside already hours behind us. A week of bonding, unlike any I remembered, behind us as well. Man, what a vacation; everything went so right, the hiking, our feelings about each other, the sex and all. It was the sort of vacation that was going to stay with me for a longtime; the kind your mind holds on to and re-broadcasts when everything else goes wrong. The kind you reference when you trade sleep for questions (and I've been there) about your life's approach and the relevance of your philosophies.

Therapy for both of us I think—actually three of us. In the back amongst our camping gear, was our Golden Retriever, Daisy. I wasn't a fan of Daisy riding the Benz, that was usually reserved for the Pontiac, but Valerie said a seven hour ride would be much more comfortable in this, and she was right. She was always right about things like that.

When Valerie took her eyes from the road and a sly smile formed at the corner of her mouth, I swear my discomfort elevated. I had to go so bad, and she knew it. She could be as spiteful as she liked with me. The pressure on my bladder was so precise that the slightest move sent acute aches through my thighs to the backs of my knees. What was worse, I was beginning to perspire.

"Now," she said, "Do you see what I have to go through?"

Oh I saw it all right, and for the first time I truly appreciated it. On the Hutchinson Merritt Parkway, when the blue sign that once upon a time made me wince,

came into view, I realized the irony in circumstance. *Service Area. 1 Mile.* Okay, I could do that. Or could I? It might as well have been one hundred miles.

"How weird," I told my wife, "this just came out of nowhere."

"It sucks, I know. Don't you worry," she told me, patting my lap and sending searing jolts right where the pain was, "just hold it another minute."

She signaled for the left lane, passing up two vehicles. One had a couple in there forties, puffing some smokes and preferring memories as opposed to conversation. Now I don't know if peeing plays tricks on your mind—like I've said my wife makes the stops—but in the pickup we were soon to pass, I would notice something that momentarily would make me forget my anguish. This two-lane highway, bound north and south, divided by a maple-lined isle, was a gorgeous stretch of road. But these maples were full grown and created trickery of shadow and light.

It was a blue GMC, blemished by wild splays of dirt. Valerie was doing about sixty, the truck, probably fifty, fifty-five. And when I looked into the driver's window I saw an empty seat behind the wheel. I looked in for a few seconds, I'm certain I did, and saw, no one, absolutely no one, just a torn leather seat with strands of silver tape patched across the headrest. "Valerie!" I yelled, not realizing how startled my tone could make her while she was driving.

"What is it?"

"Look at..." when I looked over again... He was an old farm guy, a pudgy hick, mid-fifties, wearing a flannel, and thick specs.

She made a face at me.

As she steered in front of him, I realized I expended too much energy, and my sudden movements caused the tension in my bladder to knot tighter; I closed my eyes absorbing every last bit of it.

She looked into the rearview mirror, "What about him?"

Breathing heavily, and now able to sway my legs rapidly, I said, "Does your mind fool with you when you *really* have to go?"

Daisy—because she had an appetite for daisies in our garden—barked. *You sense something too, don't you girl?* I didn't have the strength in me to turn back and look for myself. Daisy barked another shrilling bark, which echoed harshly. "What is she barking at?" my wife asked. I decided one thing. I was going to be a tough trooper, and turn my anguished body around and steal one final glance at whatever the hell it was that I *didn't* see.

I put my left hand over the headrest, took a breath and moved my butt compromising enough; the tank protested. The driver was too far behind us for me to see him, but I wasn't entirely sure he couldn't still see me, because a fractioned second after I turned to look, he signaled behind us for the same rest stop.

Oh what was the big deal? I considered the significance (if there was any), and in a crazy twisted way I guess I decided I wasn't *pissed* enough to be cautious. *This is no time to be cute*, I reminded myself, and breathed as rhythmically as a woman in labor. But I was worried about him. And I decided if I didn't have to go as bad as I did, I would have waited.

Rest areas off the Hutchison Merritt Parkway, most of them, are unconventional because they are not directly off the road; take a block off the exit and take your choice. This complimented my torture. Valerie steered into a self-service gas station with a small convenience shop. I knew these final steps would prove what I was made of. *You made it this far; does a good boy scout ever surrender?* No, a good scout never does, even if that meant being followed in by a copper trail.

"Should I gas up?" Valerie asked. The gauge read a quarter of a tank; it only made sense, but call it greater instinct (call it Houdini if you'd like) told me to take the next one. The gas could wait, nature couldn't.

"You'll have to pee soon enough," I winked at her. She gave me the only look of sarcasm. "Lock the doors, I'll be right back." The last thing I did, agonized as I was, I patted Daisy's head.

The doors did not part for me as they would in the supermarket near home; this figured. Next I feared I'd have to go to the counter and ask for a key to get in; this would also be my luck. Leaving the humidity of the afternoon for the cold in the convenience shop, I was taunted by specialty coffee radiating from thermoses (the ones that get left out all morning.)

A brave patron went for the French Vanilla, which was probably not the worst choice, but definitely not the best. Behind a row of freezers filled with soft drinks a small sign over an archway read, RESTROOMS. You would think I discovered the lost arc, but my face never showed it. I moved over cautiously, stealing a glimpse at the young lady behind the counter in the event I had to ask for that key. She was no older than eighteen or nineteen, her hair was tied back and something in her eyes told you this was not what she planned for the rest of her life. She was shelling back change for three packs of Marlboros, a bottle of Coke, and a bag of barbecue chips.

I'll never make it to that counter, I decided. The moment of truth came and passed. The door was unlocked thank God. The last thing I saw, before my relief, was the brave patron churning his coffee with a stirrer, and a ten-year-old boy—maybe his son—wearing a Yankee's cap, running with his little sister, more interested in impressing her than where he was going. Likewise, the man hadn't seen him either until a collision was imminent.

I smiled closing the door and pressing in the lock button. The floor was slick, and I didn't want to imagine why. I think I might have started pissing before I had it out. I didn't care; *worry about the pants later*. My first spray was misguided and fell far of course, but for that second all that mattered was pissing itself. I straightened out, and let it go, throwing my head back, closing my eyes, and breathing remnants of urine with a topcoat of Lysol.

I began laughing. Lightly at first until I could no longer control myself, and again my urine went off wildly. At thirty-four years old I am the youngest Lead Technical Analyst in my company's history—that company being LFX, a Fortune 100 firm in New York, thank you very much. I started as the baby, twenty-four then, surrendering to my colleagues ten years or better. Hard work has become my forte, and has done things I never would have imagined. Maybe it was because I was young, and with youth comes rebellion, or maybe it was stress, but my first day, I had this sporadic moment, a spontaneous, psychotic moment, while in mid-piss I decided it would be funny to urinate upon the walls. Just like that, tie, shirt, jacket and all. The first shot hit the sink, and its meticulous shine was instantly altered. I got the walls, the ceiling, without regard for my new colleagues, thinking *let it flow baby, let it flow*. How's that for making a statement on your first day? In the moment

it was incredibly hilarious, and I laughed all through that day and many days thereafter.

Maybe tomorrow, after my morning meeting I'll return to that restroom for old time's sake. I couldn't imagine myself doing that, not now. It's amazing our capacity for change. How we were once able to find delight in things years later you couldn't even imagine.

I zipped up. Weird, I don't know. Anyway, sweet relief. I could climb a mountain now. I didn't even remember what happened on the highway only moments ago. Not then anyway, but I would. When I opened the door wondering how the situation played with the coffee I was in for a surprise, because when I opened the door, when I went to step back into the convenience store, it was no longer the convenience store I was looking at. I patted the side of my head— *what the?*

My heart began going, and it began going quick. There were no more freezers, no racks of candies and chips, no coffee thermoses, no counter. Before me now were oaks, replete oaks spanning a vast woodland, like I came out the wrong door. *You have to piss Al? Here you go. Pick a tree and let loose.* Oak trees. Branches as dead as yesteryear. A terrain where I could see, quite clearly, bones peeking from the soil (I wondered whether or not these were human.) There was a smell... a smell like decomposition soiling the arid air. Then I had a thought—it was the least of my worries but somehow it came. I would learn a great many things did not make sense here. I was staring upon a landscape that obliged by law's all it's own, and not those of nature, for the trees in such weather would be green.

I wondered if one of two things happened: Either I slipped and I hit my head while I was laughing, or I'd passed out somehow from holding it so long. Then I saw the man in the truck from the parkway, standing where the trees were sparse; *He can manipulate the land*, I heard myself think. He leaned back, his shoe on the fender and his arms folded. Up until this point, he looked like a man, but I would learn otherwise.

What did he want from me?

Close the door! I told myself, hoping whatever freak circumstance brought me here would return me home. As I grasped it, I realized the door too had changed. It was no longer aluminum; it was pine— planks of pine brittle enough to have aged for hundreds of years. It splintered upon contact, and smelt of undisturbed dust that got up into my nose in a funny way when I slammed it shut.

In the dark I began to pray. Pray words I haven't heard myself pray in a long time. Promising God a renewal of faith (hoping He did not look too far into the future to see if I would make good on that promise.) When I opened the door, when I opened it with prayer rolling from my lips, the man was still there.

He pointed his finger at me; then turned that finger towards the heavens, and in an action that stilled the wind in my chest he motioned for me to come forward. I just stared at him. Then I closed the door again, and this time sunk down far enough to discover a bench under my butt. It was dark, but I covered my eyes anyway.

I could hear his footsteps. Hear bone and twigs crunch under his feet, and with every step each crunch became more prominent. Beneath the old door there was a fine stripe of light; I watched this light through the fingers covering my face, at the same time almost choking on my recycled warm breath. Then a certain smell found it's way to me. A mix of hay, apricot and hot tar. I realized this smell was him, and as he came forward it became as pronounced as his footsteps.

With two final crunches, the stripe under the door was compromised. Under normal circumstance, I was certain, my age advantage—close to twenty years— I would be able to lay an ass whooping on him the size of Manhattan. But these weren't normal conditions. *He's going hurt you*, I told myself, *hurt you in ways you've never been hurt, and you are never going to see Valerie again.* What did he do: he knocked. He knocked the conscious knock of a butler. What was I suppose to say, *come on in, or come back another time?* In the end I decided to say nothing at all, wondering—hoping I should say—if maybe this shed or outhouse, or whatever the fuck it was, might be a barrier protecting me in someway.

"Allen Freemont," he said getting my name right, "come step outside." I stayed right where I was, thinking hard of the rest stop; thinking if I wished hard enough I just might return. "Listen now, you come out or I'm coming in there to get you, and believe me, son, that is the last thing you want to happen."

The smell was changing. The apricot, and hay were decipitating, and the tar odor radiated-- radiated so strong, in fact, that I began to cough. I tried concealing it at first, but soon realized that wasn't going to work. The dry air that had been plentiful was fading, and I began choking like a wild man. I was breathing fumes. Tears began forming in my eyes, and I grasped my throat,

seeing the white stripe bounce uncontrollably with my movement.

I couldn't bare it any longer. With a hand on my chest I reached forward for the plank and shoved it open.

On my hands and knees, on bones and dirt, I was panting, but finally I had air. The brittle planks broke upon impact of the man—who did not waver—and fragments of wood dropped on all sides of me. Apricot, and straw blossomed heretofore.

"There," the man said to me, "isn't that better?"

"Please," I said, "please don't kill me." That was when I saw something protruding from the mouths of both his sneakers—dirty white Nikes or something. Where two feet should have been were large talons that ended in three joints, each tipped with thickly aged claw the width of drainpipes.

He looked at me funny. "Kill you? Allen Freemont do you think I brought you all this way just to kill you?"

No, he's going to have some fun with you. Torture you, and play with you like a toy. Fuck with you, the way he fucked his Nikes.

"I should hope not. Now you come and take a walk with me." As he said this I watched a piece of his shoulder fall off with a sound I will never forget. He did not flinch—I don't even think he noticed. What he had lurking beneath could make the bravest soul see his lunch—layers of moist, bulbous muscle intertwining, like something on Discovery, the insides when they cut up a body. Only I don't know that it was really a layer of muscle. I think it was *him* growing out of his mold. "This way Allen Freemont."

This time I did not resist.

I followed behind him through his forest of death, watching the mold break from his back. Soon bare masses of shoulder tissue were exposed. Then as something began maneuvering at the denim seam of the buttock, I had this horrible thought. If I did get back alive, if I found my way home, no one was ever going to believe this happened. This was going to be mine and mine alone; not an image a young professional wanted to carry around the office or otherwise. This thought scared the shit out of me.

The seam began to oscillate. I could feel my eyes bug, because something was trying to climb out of the creature's asshole, I was certain. I didn't know what tar shit smelt like, nor did I care to.

And then POP; something exploded through the denim, a thick orange block that caught me in the

knees and sent me down, cursing out in surprise. "My apologies," the thing said.

I climbed to my feet. Before me now a python of a tail, dragging through the terrain. I closed my eyes, feeling desperate and wondering, was I dead? Could I be dead and this be hell? *Yes, this is hell and this sonofabitch is going to sign you up; show you the ropes.* I stayed behind it, at a safer distance now. By the time we reached our destination, all the earth woven clothes, and the human mold from tail to head, were completely gone. Before me was a beast, comprised of raw tissue—raw muscle, with teeth rigid enough to slice bone.

He forced me down into a pit containing three stones. On the largest he sat, and instructed me to sit adjacent to him. Between us was the final stone. He raised his hand—talons, three joints, identical as his feet except the claws were more refined. "You probably have a great many questions Allen Fremont, like where you are and what you are doing here."

"I do," I said. This was the first time I looked into it's *natural* eyes and I knew as sure as I knew Routers and Gateways, that those eyes could not see me. Those eyes were lifeless, as dead as deer eyes on the highway. They moved (this is what frightened me most) they moved but the coordination was completely off; like a satanic puppeteer pulling strings. When the beast moved it's bald head, those eyes slunk around every direction, except where they should be focused. But they were eyes! They had pupils, and even though I was so sure he could not see me with them, I could still feel them looking at me.

"Last night, what did you ask for while you were staring at the novas?"

Certain times, they were rare but I found they happened most often in the company of Eric Millington, the executive vice president of the company, when my mind would draw an absolute blank. I sat here now like a stupid grade child, my head filled with shit. Last night, I was in New Hampshire on the final night of the camping trip; I must have thought a thousand things.

"Are you as heartfelt as the soils you walk upon? Oh no, of course you aren't faggot. Of course you aren't. My mistake; that is why you are here to begin with. You were at the flame with your companion. Clearer now Allen Freemont? Is that a better perspective or need I make it clearer?"

"What the hell are you?" I somehow asked it. But its

eyes were only facing mine.

“Dare to question, is dare to remain. What, in your shallow universe did you wonder Allen Freemont? You felt it like a current of electricity. Like a serpent slithering your little body; and can you now not recall it to your mind?”

I thought about it, more afraid it was going to hurt me if I didn't give the answer it sought. My most profound moment I shared with Valerie— like I said questioning life's approach and all that type stuff— but what was so unusual about that? That's the shit you think about when you're on vacation.

“That is the one,” the creature said as if it were reading my thoughts. “That is the one. I'm not the devil, and this is not hell. I'm one of many Allen Freemont, and you are my work, my territory. Arrangements comprised, that which you shall never understand, not even in your death, every third orbit I must relinquish what I've gained of but one. This is random of those who seek.”

On the stone that sat between us he placed a glass canister. Condensed steam, or so it appeared, circulated throughout, pressing up at it's sides, rising, and floating like mist. “These contents belong to you.” His claw slid around the glass creating horrid shrieks. “Do remember this: The means you undergo to obtain your jewels cannot come with sacrifice of the being given to you. Do you understand? When you sacrifice, I never give back.”

I was laughing, but I didn't know why at first, then I remembered, pissing everywhere, the first day at LFX. My head was raised and I could hear the stream bubbling the water below. See the white tiles, the mirror, the sink, smell urine and cleaner, and... I'm back. I pinched myself. I'm back! I was alive! “I'm back!”

The freezers were there. The candy racks. The counter. And a man with the morning's French running down his leg and a guilty ten year old boy (drawing a blank.)

It was the most relieving feeling. I was back! I was alive! And what the fuck just happened? Anybody?

When I didn't see our car, I feared the nightmare was still going down. But I did see our car; I was looking directly at it, and directly at my wife behind the wheel, and Daisy was there too. Only it was not the Mercedes. I walked over; not casually; visibly upset, but trying not to let it show. Manually my wife rolled the window of the Gray Monster. “What's the matter, aren't you feeling better now?”

I stepped in, not understanding heretofore what was happening or why we were back in the Gray Monster—

our first car—but at the same time I was so overjoyed that I was okay and I was with Valerie and Daisy, my two ladies.

There was something I understood about history from all this. There was history by the books, the world's history, all that was recorded all that was to be remembered, and then there was personal history. The world's history remained constant; it was still 2004, uninterrupted. My history, and Valerie's history was interrupted as was our families, our friends as far as I knew. We were changed back by ten years. It seemed intricately impossible at first, and long after I accepted it, it did not make any more sense nor have I ever grown more accustomed. I was twenty-four years old in 2004, when I should be thirty-four. I guess I could see some good in that but more than anything else it disturbed me. It made me forever aware of the sinister forces that touched my life in a Connecticut rest stop. I never liked that thought. Not one bit. Rest assured curiosity will never make for a return. Like I've said, sometimes you look back and you can't imagine.

Even more unsettling Valerie, all of our relatives, the children we once went to school with, were unaware of this play of the clock; unaware how their own lives were altered; for them time was constant. It reminded me of the impartial way lives were altered for George Bailey— only if you hear a bell chime this Clarence was not going to find himself a set of wings; horns maybe.

I never told Valerie. But one day, at the risk of insanity, I would.

There is no more Mercedes, no home overlooking the New York skyline, no lead technical Analyst for LFX. I work in a supermarket, live in an apartment, and I drive the Gray Monster— the old springboard. Everything I've worked for was gone. And who does care when the pay is little, the living space small, and the car a sleazy mechanic's fantasy? I don't waltz for any of it. I've lost so much. Have the mighty have fallen?

I looked for ways to understand what happened to me, and why I did not forget it. And no, this was not the trickery of Satan, or some anti-God, believe me I have wondered.

The mighty have not fallen. Because there comes no might in self-mutilation.



COPRILITE

by Michelle Howard

PAIN – HOT AND TIGHT – SCREWED ITSELF like a coiled spring through Tyron's tortured guts. They felt knotted together, tangled up, as though a bunch of disorganised worms constructed a daisy chain down there. He closed his eyes, and gritted his teeth, and strained.

The thing wedged inside him inched its way forward so the rounded tip poked into freedom. His hands clenched into fists. He groaned. Constipation wasn't the word. This one – which must qualify for a world record sized super turd – felt more like a watermelon, and it was coming. Dear God, it was coming.

A surge of pain sparked up his spine. The giant excrement fought for release. Tyron screamed. Did something rip? Was this how a woman felt giving birth? Another quake shook his lower half, as if to say, this is it, ready or not.

He cried out, and the bathroom door hammered in its frame. "Is everything alright in there, honey?" Carla's voice called.

"Y-e-s." He managed to squeeze the single syllable through clenched teeth.

"Are you sure?" She sounded unconvinced.

He nodded, aware it was a feeble gesture since Carla couldn't see through doors.

"Honey? Can I get you something?"

He couldn't answer. His butt hole was wider than he would have thought possible. His teeth ground together, his shoulders hunched, his back curved, he pounded the wall. His mind crying, *out, out, out!*

"Do you need help?"

Oh God, he needed something. Agony swallowed his whole body. He rocked on the toilet seat, afraid he might pass out with the giant super turd halfway protruded from his rectum like some triumphant alien flag. He was screaming, at least he suspected he was. The sound was distant, and warped. It could have been him, or it could have been Carla. The door was shaking with an urgency that threatened to buckle the flimsy lock. Through blurred eyes, Tyron watched the latch start to tear from the doorframe, all the while wondering if the skin of his anus endured a similar fate.

Two things happened at once – the door burst open, and the stupendous excretion popped from Tyron's guts like a fat pea from a shooter. He expected an almighty splash. Water would erupt and quench his butt, but he was falling, headed for the bathroom tiles nose first. He landed on his elbows, bumping his face, knees crunched, shorts and jeans bunched around his ankles, his naked, no doubt ragged, rear end pointed at the ceiling as though poised to fire another missile.

Hands fell onto his shoulders. "Are you alright? What happened? Should I call a doctor?" The voice was Carla's and it came across as frantic. The hands clambered over his body, her presence shifted toward his lower half. Tyron blinked water from his eyes, and stared at the shower cubicle. The blue and grey tiles there seemed to dance. The floor rug transformed into a white furry slug, which proceeded to march away, perhaps disgusted by the whole event.

"You're bleeding!" Carla's hands were on his buttocks, poking and probing around the sore open wound that must be his butt crack mutated into a great gaping canyon. "I'll call a doctor, I'll—" She stood up, half turned, and stopped with a jerk. "Oh my God! What is *that*?"

Tyron spun his head to look over his shoulder. Carla was standing over him, her eyes – practically on stalks – fixed not on his airborne arse, but on the toilet bowl. She raised a hand and pointed, shaking her head, taking a shuffled step back. "Did you do that?"

Tyron scampered around on all fours, and craned his neck to see. At first he made out the cratered top of what looked like a colossal lump of shit stuck up beyond the toilet's rim, but as he raised himself so he knelt and peered into the pit, his mouth fell open, and his eyes grew similar stalks to Carla's. It couldn't be.

There, planted in the loo, was a dark brown boulder the size of a rugby ball, the same shape, too. It looked scaly and lumpy, the texture like leather rather than faeces.

Tyron slumped down so his butt touched his ankles. A bolt of pain reminded him of the damage there, but shock prevented him from easing the situation, or caring. He couldn't believe that thing – whatever the hell it was – came out of *him*.

Carla put a hand on his shoulder, her fingers clasped a degree too hard, her red locks rocked around the smooth contours of her stark white, bug eyed face. "I better call a doctor ...". Her voice trailed off because the thing in the toilet bowl jolted.

She leaned in closer, squinting her eyes like she hoped the sudden jerk had been an illusion, but even as she double-dared it to repeat the sin, it jumped up and down, shook, and threw itself to the side. Carla's hand went to her mouth. "What is *that*?"

Tyron simply stared, his butt aching, guts churning – those worms still busy constructing their daisy chain. The brown lump shivered, it rocked and rolled around its white porcelain cage. Its leathery hide started to bulge, then pulse. It bumped back and forth with its strange skin beating like a disembodied heart. Tyron stretched out his hand without meaning to. His finger shot out, and before he could stop himself, he prodded the hull of what he suspected might be an intergalactic spacecraft.

Carla swatted his head. "Don't do that!" She backed up, both hands plastered to the sides of her cheeks.

Another bound, a rumble, and a crack appeared – a throbbing slit through which yellow, pussy goo poured, dribbling down the lumpy rind, pooling into the toilet water below. Something sharp crawled out. It wiggled, and twitched, and squeaked.

Squeaked!

And growled.

Growled!

"It's an egg," Carla gasped, head swinging back and forth as her feet shuffled on the bathroom tiles.

"An egg!" Tyron yelled, his butt still on fire, his guts now acting like a merry-go-round, his head screaming, *men don't shit eggs*.

Maybe he could tell that to the thing now worming its way through the hole. The yellow gloop drained away, and a scaly, clawed arm writhed into the air.

"What the hell is it?" Carla looked like she couldn't take her eyes off it.

"I dunno," Tyron whispered.

A green eye peered out at him, amid which a thin black slot darted and flicked. Then a snout, small and snuffing, and a mouth filled with tiny pearl, needled teeth, pushed its way through. The creature struggled to free itself from its shell, dragging loose a long, whip tail that swished and slashed. It started to scrabble at the toilet bowl, kicking away the deflated sheath and splashing in the water. Its

hind legs flexed, and the dripping wet thing leapt onto the rim of the loo seat. It shook like a dog, dislodging the last of its slimy coating, revealing a sleek little body, dull brown scales, tiny forearms, and long back legs.

Carla stepped toward it, both fear and awe in her eyes. "Is that what I think it is?"

Tyron stood, yanked up his shorts and jeans, and fumbled with the zipper. "It can't be. It's ..."

"A dinosaur." Carla's voice was filled with marvel.

"Impossible." His head rocked in disbelief. "People – I mean *I* – don't go round laying dinosaur eggs."

He reached out to touch the creature, which bobbed its head in a birdlike manner, determined to disprove its existence. Its nostrils billowed at the approach of his half curled fingers, its teeth bared, and a mewling snarl erupted. Snap. It pounced.

Tyron shrieked as the teeth closed on his hand, sinking into the meat of his palm. Carla screamed and batted at the monster. It clung on tight, munching toward his wrist, hanging on with all it had.

"Get it off, get it off."

Tyron span in a circle, arm flailing, enraged baby dinosaur clinging on.

"Let go!"

"Hold still." Carla grabbed him, then caught the monster's tail, and pulled. It grunted, growling, biting down harder, drawing beads of blood, and turning the surrounding flesh purple.

"Get it off."

Tyron raised his free fist and thumped the reptilian monster between its bright green eyes. It squealed, but didn't budge. Carla tugged, and Tyron cried. The teeth slipped through his hand, cutting a trail of grooves. He thrashed and it lost its grip. Carla staggered back with it twisting in her grasp. She hit the toilet, bowled over it, and ended up on her back, dinosaur held above her chest.

"Get rid of it!" Tyron yelled.

It turned in her hand, and she wailed. The teeth clenched inches from her face. She threw it. It smacked the wall, jumped back to its feet and came racing across the tiles, claws click-clacking, jaws working overtime.

Tyron snatched it seconds before it could launch an attack on his big toe. He hooked up its tail and hurled the miniature snapdragon into the bathtub. The little thing smashed to an ungraceful landing, then clambered around, unable to walk without slipping in the bath.

"Are you alright?" Tyron asked, helping Carla up.

"Yeah, just – well, you know."

He nodded and gave her a hug, but she didn't return the gesture, he could feel her straining to see over his shoulder.

"What do we do with it?" she asked.

He shook his head, and glanced into the bath's crater. The dinosaur snapped at him, and bounced about. It clawed at the tub's rim, but couldn't quite jump high enough.

Tyron sighed, "At least it's trapped."

Carla nodded. "Did it really come out of you?"

"Uh-huh."

"How?"

"Bloody painful, that's how."

"But?"

"I don't know. Something I ate. That curry, maybe. How the hell should I know?"

Carla wrinkled her nose as she watched the creature squirming in the tub. "Is it really what it looks like?"

"Huh?"

"A Tyrannosaurus Rex."

He looked at her. "Well, it ain't an iguana, that's for damn sure."

"Thank goodness it's only small."

The creature squeaked. Its body trembled, juddered. It yapped, hissed, and snarled, and in a split second more than doubled in size.

"What the hell?"

The Tyrannosaurus Rex now stood tall enough to hold its head above the level of the bath. It was as big as a Labrador, and it was drooling, its teeth still bloodstained, green eyes fixated.

"Jesus!"

It leapt, cleared the tub, and came straight at them. Tyron booted its head, grabbed Carla's hand, and heaved her from its rampage. She yelped as he threw her out the door, and cried again when he landed, splat, right on top of her.

A tooth-armed nose came after them, steamy breath, and a lumbering body. Claws scratched and skidded on the tiles. It collided with the wall. Tyron lunged forward, snatched the door handle, and hauled it closed, trapping the monster.

The door hammered, and he slumped against its frame, out of puff. "It's okay," he told Carla, who was trembling. "It can't get out."

Her eyes were huge, bright, and glistening. "What if?"

The door shivered harder than before. Groans came from behind him, tremors rocked the floor, and then a fully fledged roar tore through the air. The door thudded. The wood splintered. A crash followed, as did the sound of gushing water.

Tyron caught Carla's hand. "Run!"

They dived for the stairs, and the bathroom door exploded behind them. Thunder blasted, and Tyron flinched at the scrape of jaws on his arm. He shoved Carla onto the staircase, glancing over his shoulder just enough to see the dinosaur – bigger than a horse – pounding after them. Its claws shredded the carpet, tail dented the walls.

"Move it."

They reached the bottom of the staircase, and Tyron felt sure the thing couldn't follow them. It couldn't negotiate the stairs, it'd topple, overbalance – and it did. It plunged headfirst, roared as it went, and came down the stairs like a giant sledge, jaws bumping over each step, propelled by the bulk of its body, tail swimming after it.

Carla screamed, and Tyron shunted her forward with a yell of his own. The monster clattered into the landing, and immediately sought its feet. It rolled and kicked, taking out two banister posts in the process.

Tyron pulled Carla into the living room. She fell onto the sofa, and he nosedived into the fireplace. The creature was bigger again, twice as big as before, head squeezed through the doorway, jaws in action, rancid breath bubbling from its dark throat. Thank God the rest of it didn't fit. It couldn't get through, its shoulders were jammed. It shook its head. The doorframe busted, creaked, and cracked. It grunted, its feet clawing forward inch by hard earned inch.

Carla ran to Tyron and picked him up. "What now?"

He looked at the creature, no way could they get past it, and no other doors from which to escape. "The window, quick."

They tore at the catch, found it locked, and Tyron's brain informed him the key was left in the kitchen. He made use of the lamp, ripped off the shade, and clubbed the glass with its base. The window became a network of veins.

"Hurry," Carla cried, clinging to him.

A glance over his shoulder showed the dinosaur halfway through the door, caught by its immense body.

He swung the lamp again, and this time the glass shattered into sheets of razor blades. Tyron knocked away the jagged shards that toothed the lower frame, and guided Carla through. She struggled to clear the rose bush outside.

"Come on," she urged. She reached in for him, and his hand locked into hers. He went to move, but something had his ankle. The dinosaur was on him, its tongue crawled from its maw, lapping, tasting, wanting to eat its very creator. Tyron spun around and clouted it with the lamp. Carla latched her fingers onto his shoulders and heaved. He started to slither through the window, face torn by rose thorns, Tyrannosaurus Rex licking his heels.

He panted his way into the front yard. The dinosaur bellowed through the window, and hissed like a snake.

"Hey, keep it down over there."

Tyron crawled to Carla's feet, and climbed up to see Mr Gregory leering at him from over the fence, apparently unaware of the monster.

"You kids are always disturbing the peace, music too loud, TV on till midnight, and ..."

"Mr Gregory, we have to—"

Smash.

The living room wall burst and tumbled like children's play blocks, the earth shivered, and the Tyrannosaurus Rex – now over four metres tall – came stomping through the mayhem with a curtain rail clutched in its mouth like a twig.

"What the hell is that?" Mr Gregory yelled. He shook his free fist, and raised his garden rake in the other.

Tyron watched the monster crush the curtain pole so it snapped in two halves, and landed splintered and ruined on the lawn, amid a heap of blue fabric. He felt Carla against him, holding his arm, towing him toward the gateway.

The dinosaur's home cinema sized head zipped back and forth. Its tail swiped and sent a fresh rain of rumble to the ground. The green eyes flashed in the afternoon sun, and its upper lip curled up, displaying carving knife teeth, slathered with shiny wet drool.

Mr Gregory waved his rake in the air. Tyron yelped at him to run, as he and Carla fled for the gate, but Mr Gregory charged toward the creature with a wild and savage roar. He cleared the waist high picket fence in a single vault bulldozed over the flowerbed, dragged back his pronged weapon, and landed a blow to the beast's

shoulder.

Tyron froze in his tracks, aware the commotion had lured all the nearby residents from their homes. Mrs Umbridge stood surrounded by a pile of discarded laundry. Mr Henderson released the grip on his St Bernard's leash, his eyes huge, his faithful companion stiff like a statue, tail rigid behind it. Little Beth fell over on her rollerblades. Young Todd Baker stopped digging his hole. Mrs Chambers appeared on her doorstep, and Mr Michaels froze solid, one foot in, one foot out of his parked pickup truck, while Mrs Lake's mobility scooter ploughed into a hedge.

"Get out of here, you great brute. Get out and stay out." Mr Gregory bellowed.

Tyron turned to Mr Gregory beating the dinosaur with the rake. His face was purple, and resembled a prune. He screamed with every blow he dealt. The Tyrannosaurus, which seemed quite stunned at first, now looked down at the man, grunting each time the rake stabbed its hide.

"Get out, get out."

The Tyrannosaurus blinked, then let loose a roar that whipped up Mr Gregory's hair as if caught by a tornado. The man's puce face drained of its colour, the rake clattered down to his side. He looked up into the gaping jaws that squalled above him, and didn't move a muscle, or even make a sound when the giant mouth swallowed up his head, shoulders, and torso, and crunched down on his waist. A spray of red made Mr Gregory look like a grape smooshed between someone's forefinger and thumb. The dinosaur thrashed its head, bit again, and down plopped Mr Gregory's severed legs, twitching at the knees. A gulp later and they were gone as well. The monster raised its gaze, locked eyes with Tyron, cried its foghorn siren, and everyone in the street screamed.

Carla yanked Tyron's hand, and they set off down the drive, the thunder of footfalls shook the ground beneath them. They reached the gate and Mr Henderson's dog flew past in a flurry of rich red and white fur. Tyron looked back to see the animal growl and wrestle with the thing's ankle. The dinosaur nudged it aside, and ran on – its head, tail, and shoulders inline.

Tyron made a right angle turn at the alley between Mr Gregory's and Mrs Umbridge's home. Mrs Umbridge was already there. Mrs Chambers too, and little Beth – both knees grazed.

The Tyrannosaurus tried to squash into the alley. The house walls grumbled beneath its weight. Bits of cracked

debris fluttered down around it. It bared its teeth, and yelled its frustration, but couldn't squeeze its bulk in.

Through the creature's tree trunk legs, Tyron saw Mr Michaels had crawled under his pickup truck. Five-year-old Todd, across the street, was hidden beneath the garden slide. Mr Henderson still stood in the road, out in the open, screaming at his dog, which persisted to attack the intruder, its efforts no more effective than a feeble sparrow determined to protect its nest from a tiger. Mr Henderson lashed out with his walking cane and struck the dinosaur's foot. It wheeled around, seeming to notice both him, and the barking mutt.

Mr Henderson's mouth swung wide on its hinges. Regret smacked his eyes. He turned in an instant, and ran, cane left abandoned in the road. The Tyrannosaurus followed, while the dog pursued, and struggled in vain to bring the giant down.

"Not that way!" Tyron shrieked, as Mr Henderson headed straight into the dead end nub of the T junction they lived on.

The man realised too late. He stopped, shoulders drooped in dismay, and when the thing's shadow stormed over him, he dropped to the road in a small and shivery ball.

"I'll 'ave ya, you great mongrel!" Mrs Lake's gravelly, sand papered voice rasped. She'd backed her mobility scooter from the hedge, and now raced as though she wanted to win the old folk's scooter Grand Prix down the street.

The Tyrannosaurus spun away from Mr Henderson, who dared to look up, and received a huge lick from his dog.

Mrs Lake looked like a bonfire Guy astride her four wheeled, three geared mobility scooter. Its motor hummed, she lowered her head. Maybe she thought she was a bowling ball, and the thirteen meter length lizard a skittle.

A lift of the creature's foot put an end to the old woman's rampage. Both woman and scooter alike mashed flat with a sickening snap, crackle, crunch, squelch when the huge foot stamped down upon them.

Tyron closed his eyes. Carla hugged herself to his chest, and clung tighter still when the munching sounds of eating began.

"It's coming back!" someone yelled.

Tyron opened his eyes to see Mr Henderson and his dog had made it into an adjacent alley across the street. The

dinosaur – the wing mirror of the scooter stuck between its teeth – came stomping across the street. It was headed for Tyron's hiding place, but stopped short as Todd – still cowering beneath the garden slide – whimpered. Its green eyes spied what to it must be a tender morsel. A fat pink tongue trailed the edge of its grimaced lips. It lowered the bulk of its head, breathed deep, and sniffed.

Carla wailed, "Oh God, no!"

Tyron hung onto her shoulders to prevent her from rushing from the safety of the alley, to meet with a similar fate to poor Mrs Lake and Mr Gregory. She pounded a fist on his chest. "No, we can't let it get him."

Tyron felt helpless. He peered at Todd, who plastered his hands over his face and started to cry. The dinosaur circled the plastic, yellow slide, and nudged it with the tip of its nose. The flimsy thing wobbled. The Tyrannosaurus grunted and prodded again, its nostrils inches from Todd's head.

"Do something!" Carla begged, still attempting to escape Tyron's grip.

Tyron searched with thin hope. There had to be something, there had to – the pickup truck. The keys dangled in the ignition. Mr Michaels was still underneath it.

Tyron shoved Carla so hard she fell on her butt in the alley. He didn't look back to check if she was okay, he sprinted over the road, and flung himself into the trunk's driver seat. A twist of the keys and the engine sputtered to life. God, he hoped Mr Michaels had the sense to stay still. He threw the gears into reverse, and hit the gas. The truck rocketed backwards, and smashed down a garden fence. Mr Michaels was left sprawled flat in the road, hands clasped over the back of his head. Tyron spun the wheel, changed gears, and floored the gas. The engine's roar rivalled that of the beast, which proceeded to tip the slide over, and went in to scoop Todd into its jaws.

Tyron screamed, and screwed down the lids of his eyes. The truck rammed full force into the dinosaur's legs, creating a crash that sent shock waves rolling through Tyron. Metal squealed above him. Glass shattered. Something struck his head hard, and an almighty thunder raged.

For a moment Tyron was dazed. Colours spun around him when he opened his eyes. Slowly they blended and knitted together to form an image of a mangled plastic slide, and the Tyrannosaurus stretched out on the ground. It was grunting, its eyes sharper than ever. Its tiny, useless

arms tried to drag it across the tarmac. Its feet flipped back and forth. Blood gushed from its crippled knees. It looked straight at Tyron, snapped its defiance, and started to worm forward, squiggling like a fish plucked out of the water. Little Todd was nowhere to be seen.

Tyron gritted his teeth, wrapped his aching knuckles around the distorted steering wheel, and thumped his foot down. The engine whined, and the truck sprang. Tyron didn't close his eyes, or take them off the monster's this time. He thought he caught a note of fear register in their flecked green depths, a moment before the truck ploughed into them. The crack of bones rang, and Tyron flopped down over the wheel, and stretched his hands across the dashboard. Through the broken windshield he could see a meat stew splattering, and a dark, seeping puddle.

The body of the Tyrannosaurus Rex lay limp, unanimated, except for the growing pool of blood clothing the road. The tail looked like a fat, heavy dead snake. The torso a chunk of meat, from which trailed two busted legs. The head was out of sight, wedged beneath the truck. Tyron sighed.

Poor Todd.

"You did it!" Carla's voice said, high pitched and shrill. The truck door opened and hands dragged him out, raised him high. The neighbours held him on their shoulders and cheered. Carla beamed up at him, and in the middle of everyone was little Todd, positioned just two meters from the dinosaur's flattened head.

"I did it," Tyron gasped, as they lowered him down. "I got the bastard."

Carla hugged him.

"Where the heck did it come from?" Mr Henderson asked.

Tyron felt his cheeks grow hot. All eyes settled on him. He opened his mouth to answer, but failed to do so when Mrs Chambers clutched her gut, fell to her knees, and cried out.

Mr Henderson collapsed next.

Mrs Umbridge.

Mr Michaels.

Carla.

And then Tyron – hands clamped to his abdomen – screamed, as a new lump began to force its way down.



BREEDER

by William Todd Rose

FIRST INCISION MAN STOOD IN THE SHADOWS, as always, with only a vague silhouette and the gleam of moonlight on scalpel to betray his presence. Virginia knew he was there, however, and pretended to be asleep as she kept watch through the slit of one squinted eye: her nocturnal intruder never shifted positions, never fidgeted or seemed to look anywhere but straight forward. The blade appeared to be held at waist level, as far as she could tell, and was held steady.

She tried to listen, to see if he made any type of sound. But if there was any shuffling or perhaps the rhythmic rise and fall of breathing, it was lost beneath the pounding of her own heartbeat. Surely, he had to hear it? He had to know that a pulse that rapid was not the cadence of someone wrapped snugly in the comfort of dreams . . .

At the same time, Virginia could feel them in her blood, wriggling and squirming like headless snakes in the July sun. Individually, they were no larger than the finest of hairs and could probably pass undetected in small colonies. However, she was infested with them. Their bodies intertwined and knotted together in writhing clumps; blood was still able to squish around them, but their sheer numbers made her heart work even harder and her hands and feet felt numb from the decreased oxygen.

She knew that if he opened her, the pressure beneath her skin would be relieved and they would spill out of the wound like the blossoming of tiny intestines. Pink. Smooth. Smelling slightly of fruit that had just started to go bad. They would squish out of the slit and slither down her arm or belly, leaving a sticky trail for others to follow. They would writhe across the sheets of her bed and drop almost soundlessly to the floor. They would go out into the world to do his bidding, leaving nightmares, tears, and terror in their wake.

But only once they were fully mature and the incubation complete. Virginia had discovered this the hard way by trying on countless occasions to open herself. She had sliced her arm with a kitchen knife and tried to catch them with a pair of tweezers. The first few times, she had been too slow and they slurped back inside the wound and refused to re emerge regardless of how tightly

she pinched the flesh. Eventually, however, she was able to get a grip on one of them: she pulled until it was stretched thin and seemed about ready to come free, only to have the disgusting little worm slip from the tweezers and snap back like a rubber band. She had tried burning them with cigarettes, but they reacted too quickly to the heat, leaving her with circular blisters over top the cuts which had freed them. So she had no choice but to wait for the gestation to run its course and for First Incision Man to set them free.

She may have dozed off for a moment or perhaps she only blinked, but he was suddenly closer to her, about halfway to the bed now; and yet he was still cloaked in shadow, almost as if the darkness had moved with him. Which really came as no surprise: Virginia had never actually seen his face, no matter how near he came, and some primal instinct deep within her knew it was for the best. This part of her mind recoiled from the thought of laying eyes upon him in the same way a hand is reflexively pulled away from fire. It knew that the details of his form were the key that would unlock the gates of madness and for his cloak of obscurity, at least, she was thankful.

As always, though, his approach coaxed the whispers from the walls. The words seemed to swirl in the air around her, rising and falling in volume, sometimes too soft to be anything more than a murmur, at other times loud enough that they seemed to vibrate in the bones of her skull. Sentences overlapped, bled into one another, as if there were fifty speakers hiding somewhere within the drywall: but no matter how many things were being said, there was always just a single voice hissing them all: her voice.

Dirty little girl . . .

. . . stupid, worthless, ignorant . . .

. . . all your fault, can't do anything right, can you?

The whispering seemed to excite the worm-like things in her blood. She could feel them twisting beneath her skin, stronger than before, like tribal dancers whipped into a frenzy by the pounding of drums. Pain flared through her flesh and it was all too easy to imagine them getting stronger, swelling in size until they threatened to rip through her muscle and tissue on their own.

... fat and ugly, why would anyone love you, you stupid little ...

Virginia could feel a scream trapped in her throat and wanted nothing more than to cry out like she had when she was little. She wanted her mother to appear in the doorway and sweep away all the bogeymen with the flick of a light switch. She ached to feel her mother's hands smoothing her hair as she was held tightly and rocked back and forth.

But every muscle in her body felt as if it were locked in place. She could not pull away, could not even so much as turn her head from the shadowy figure who was now nearly halfway to her bed. So her cry for help remained lodged like a half-swallowed chunk of meat in the back of her throat and a single tear slid from the corner of her eye instead.

... better off without you ...

It wasn't as if her mother would believe her anyway. She had tried to explain once, had pushed up the sleeves of the sweaters which she now wore year-round, and showed her mother the scars criss-crossing her arms. She had rehearsed this moment in her mind for days before finally mustering up the courage to speak about it and knew exactly what she would say. But when the moment actually came, she found herself blubbering: all of her carefully practiced explanations fragmented into sniffles and barely comprehensible snippets. And the entire time she could picture him lurking somewhere within her brain, slicing her sentences with his scalpel, severing words from meaning, leaving half-formed thoughts dissected and dying with surgical precision.

So First Incision Man had never actually been brought into the conversation. The whispers from the walls morphed into only what was being said and not who, or what, was actually speaking them. All of the details of her nightly torture were blurred into something that only half-resembled the truth.

Shortly after that, she began seeing Dr. Singh. But by then, it was too late. Virginia had given up. If she was not able to describe it to her own mother, how could she ever tell this complete stranger what had really caused the cuts that covered her body? So she would sit in his office for an hour each week, staring at the tips of her sneakers and biting her bottom lip.

... useless waste of flesh ...

First Incision Man was now leaning over her and Virginia squeezed her eyes shut so tightly that bursts of

light seemed to explode like fireworks in the darkness. She could feel the cool edge of the blade against her stomach and shivers crept over her flesh. He always waited, sometimes for minutes on end, sometimes for only a few seconds. During that time, the things in her blood seemed to congregate to wherever he was holding the scalpel. She could feel them knotting up beneath its tip, forming a tight little ball that bulged and twisted with anticipation.

A flash of pain just above her belly button let her know that the act had been done. Almost instantly, she felt as if a built up pressure were spilling out of the slit. It was not just the worms being freed from their fleshy incubator: it almost felt as if they had somehow latched onto all the emotions within her, all the fear and rage and pain, and had pulled it through the slice with them. Instead of whispering, the walls now sighed, all the voices exhaling in unison.

And then, in the space of time it took for her heart to beat once, he was gone and the walls were quiet.

Virginia pulled herself into a tight ball and opened her eyes. Drops of blood were spreading across her nightgown like roses unfurling their petals against a field of snow. There was no trace of the worms: they had already disappeared into the night, eager to do their father's bidding. Usually, once he was gone, there was no trace left to prove that First Incision Man had ever been in the room. But tonight was different: laying across her bed was his scalpel.

Inside, Virginia felt as if she had been hollowed-out. She could not bring herself to cry. She could not summon any sort of relief that the ordeal was over, at least for another night. Where there had once been a tangle of emotion and feeling, there was now only a vast, silent void as dark and featureless as First Incision Man himself.

She sat up in bed and touched the scalpel as if she thought it might suddenly twist around and lash out at her. The blade was smooth and cool beneath her fingertip, the grip textured just enough to keep it from slipping out of the wielder's grasp.

She held the blade in front of her eyes and spun it back and forth, watching the way light reflected off the steel. He would be back for it, would he not? Even if it hadn't been left behind, he would be back. Tomorrow night another brood of worms would have grown to the point of needing release; tomorrow night the walls would

again whisper their derision and, when it had all played out, she would again be left with this cavernous vacuum where life and emotion should have reigned.

She was tired. So tired of the game he played with her. So tired of it all

Without a sound, she turned her left arm so that her wrist was exposed. She contemplated the raised veins and thought about the parasites festering there. And, without further hesitation, she took the scalpel and began to slash.

When he came tomorrow, she would not be there. She will have won.

* * *

Elizabeth stirred from her sleep and wondered what had awoken her. She could hear the ticking of the grandfather clock in the hall, very faintly her father snoring from another room. The house was quiet and dark.

She remembered the fragments of a dream: something small and slick wriggling its way into her ear. In fact, the tickling sensation was still there. She sat up, thinking of the cotton swabs in the bathroom and perhaps a drink of water before going back to sleep.

And then she saw him. A man, standing in the shadows of the corner of her room. Not more than a silhouette really, but there was something in his hand. Something that gleamed like polished steel in the moonlight.



Twice Buried, Once Shy

by Bosley Gravel

. . . *tap, tap, tap* . . .

He welcomed the soft earth when it became his grave, and when his flesh had rotted away, he thought he might be free, but no, his spirit was much stronger than the soft meat that animated his bones.

He vowed to dig his way out and get his revenge; he wasn't even sure why she chose to split his skull with that brick. He hadn't gotten far, before he realized he was impossibly wrapped in plastic—but his efforts had earned him little space to move his fingers. Now he could . . . tap, tap, tap . . . on the locket he had pulled from her neck; the locket with his picture and hers embedded in a golden heart.

She was gone now, he supposed, it must have been decades ago that she had buried him, and not even deep. From time to time he could hear the hikers coming through, and worse yet, he had heard her and her accomplice make love over his shallow grave the night they buried him.

. . . *tap, tap, tap* . . .

Lately, he heard new sounds, the sounds of machines, their grumbling voices prophesying—telling the tale of coming changes up above. Their voices so different from the quiet whispers of the rocks, the roots, and the earth itself. The earth had consoled him in those first days when he was bound—bound in the mud, the loam, the mire and the worms, the rocks as his bed. The earth revealed the burdens of immortality to him, as the shrews and moles burrowed through his bones.

. . . *tap, tap, tap* . . .

The machines would come, and the men would find him. He had promised himself it would be his secret: that wisps of his soul still hung on these bones. He wondered if they might pull him apart, piece by piece, and drop him in an evidence tray. Perhaps he would finally be free

when his yellowed bones turned to dust in some dark drawer.

. . . *tap, tap, tap* . . .

The locket might lead them to her, he thinks, but to what end? She must be long buried too. Suddenly, he remembers her name: . . . Anna . . .

. . . *tap, tap, tap* . . .

The machines are coming—he hears them grind into the earth—and for the first time in decades the dirt rests lightly on his chest. And they dig, and mumble their prophecy . . . and finally he is dumped into a pile of dirt, the plastic prevents his bones from scattering. A man notices he has found something unusual, and they are upon him with curious eyes, picking their teeth and smoking while they wait.

* * *

In the box, he has nothing to tap, and nothing to do. No loamy earth to tell him she'll hold him in her arms forever. Nothing. He sits for a decade on hard plastic, separated into dozens of pieces.

But finally . . .

They put him back in the ground, after all these years, snug in a new box. Some kind soul has given him the locket back. It is only hours before he realizes, he is not alone, and he laughs with his spirit breath spilling out of him as he realizes they have re-buried him next to Anna, in the graves they had bought together as man and wife.

. . . *tap, tap, tap* . . .

He can hear her frantic thoughts, the guilt, the anger. The earth does not console her, as it did him, oh no, on the contrary . . .

. . . *tap, tap, tap* . . .

“Anna,” he whispers through the dirt, “Anna, I’ve been waiting so long, so long . . .”

And he whispers horrors to her, the horrors she’ll face in the next century, and further still—for in their bond, fortified by murder, not even in death do they part . . .



CHRYsalis

by Janie Hoffman

»

The first woman hunted
by Jack the Ripper
was sad as wet cotton,
gray as a timber wolf
on the final night of her life.
Wet cobblestones tumbled
before her like rubble,
the shadowless alley
walling her in like a cocoon.
She was unafraid of the dark
and menace and the very cold hands.

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Selection of stories for the first anthology will be underway shortly and publication can be expected to begin within the first half of 2009. Authors will be contacted if his or her story has been selected and the details will be arranged from that point forward.

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